
Power Dichotomies: An exploratory comparison between online and offline spaces

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Abstract

A grounded theory analysis was carried out with participants aged 18-25 from around New Zealand, particularly within the Christchurch vicinity, to develop an understanding of the behavioural responses by individuals when they are anonymously communicating online. It was found that detachment from an individual's identity occurred, creating an impersonal and distant interaction free from the normal social constraints of the offline, real life environment. The study found that technological dehumanisation was evident, which proposes that individuals relinquish linkages to their persona as a means to subconsciously justify behaviours, which are contrary to the norms of society. Repercussions of this dehumanised interaction include reduced external power to manipulate and influence, and emphasises the importance of an individual's internal power, such as self-efficacy, to control one's persona such as likeability and expertise as a means to feel personal empowerment.

This study helps further the understanding between anonymous behaviours and behavioural power dynamics by identifying a new dimension to the behavioural discrepancies seen online. It also creates a foundation for future works to develop further understanding of both the positive and negative repercussions of anonymous online behaviours, both in a social context and in the workplace.

Keywords: Online environment; Technological dehumanisation; Power; Anonymous behaviours

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“The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any.”

Alice Walker

1 Introduction Statement

Mankind has seen portrayals of power throughout history. Peacemakers and influential leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela were powerful advocates whom reformed societies to better human morality. Power used for evil and corruption has been equally evident in society from Adolf Hitler over half a century ago, to Kim Jong II in more recent times. These leaders exploited varying characteristics of charisma to coercive forces of intimidation, all to achieve influence by the masses. As such, it is evident that power plays a fundamental part in the evolution and structure of societies and therefore it is not only relevant, but also vital to develop an understanding of this phenomenon.

Influential leaders of the present day include such minds as the cofounders of Google; Larry Page and Sergey Brin and Facebook's creator, Mark Zuckerberg through revolutionising the online environment. This is because the Internet has become such a crucial part of society that developers in the industry are the modern day powerhouses. The online interface itself has nearly three billion users worldwide to date (Luckerson, 2014). Over one billion of these users communicate with others every month via means of social networking sites, specifically Facebook (Edwards, 2014). These figures show that more and more of our global society is turning to online communications. As a result, the industry is exponentially increasing in capital, with the worth of such sites as Facebook reaching over 190 billion USD (Dillet, 2014). Another main contender of consumption online is the gaming industry, worth over 24 billion USD, now superseding that of the box office (Galarneau, 2014).

This shows that society is undoubtedly reliant on the Internet and predictions of use are to only escalate in coming years (Fletcher, 2014). A field of research into online behaviours, specifically interactions and communications, is therefore becoming imperative as a means of understanding motivations and implications. To explore the now integrated aspect of the offline world, the Internet's complexities provide a basis for increased future relations and exchanges. It is important to note the perception and use of power is just as much an integral part of human interaction. Thus, the opportunity to merge these two fundamental components between an individual's power and the online medium of which strongly contributes to societies lifeblood, is essential to be explored as a means to further our understanding of what repercussions this now booming industry could have on mankind.

1.1 Background to the Problem

The current academic conversation has a distinct separation between the perception of power in communication, and behavioural responses in the online environment. Because of this, there does not seem to be any apparent link between the phenomena of power, and the Internet as a means for interaction. Further, the online/offline comparative literature seems to lack insight around the realm of power and the types of internal or external power. Because the literature pertaining to the proposed line of research is lacking, there is opportunity to create a foundation for the literature and to provide a basis for further studies.

Further justification for the study of online interactions is apparent throughout the literature. Herring, Barab, Kling and Gray (2004) suggest that the online environment is rich and diverse with varying levels of communication, and thus exemplifies an area for further

exploration. The Internet is relatively new and growing rapidly as a communication tool for work and for social activity, therefore research in this field is considered young and needs more attention (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). The online environment is also an appropriate space to explore real-world phenomena and psychological processes, which have been rarely looked at in the past (Gosling, Augustine, Vazire, Holtzman & Gaddis, 2011). Jones, Ravid and Rafaeli (2004) suggest too, that previous scholarly examination underplays the relationships between online interaction and human behaviour. This supports the proposed study, which compares the online and offline environments and attempts to explain the reasons for different behaviours.

The notion that the online environment creates a space in which behaviours differ significantly from offline is pivotal to the present research. Christopherson (2007) offers fundamental insights into the repercussions of anonymous behaviour on social interaction and is crucial to the current study, which expands this view in relation to the perception of power and power dynamics. Society today has a fragmented and varied sense as to the definition of power. As power is only a perception it will always somewhat be bounded by subjective constraints, however it is essential that society has the opportunity to advance their understanding and knowledge as to the ramifications the online environment could have on power itself. It is evident that power is one of the bases of humanity's social and structural development, so when an environment such as the Internet emerges and begins to rapidly swallow the time and efforts of society it is imperative to develop an understanding as to the dynamic and potential repercussions of behaviours and social structures as a whole.

Historically, before social networking sites and the web 2.0 were developed, personal

interaction and social dynamics were restricted to the offline environment. This meant there were limited interfaces in which an individual could assert behaviours such as dominance and power. These expressions were therefore restricted generally to face-to-face interactions. However, in more recent times as the dynamic shift toward technology and Internet communications surface, society has significantly adopted the online interface. This shift creates a multitude of opportunities for the perception and use of power to vary significantly through many different forms. This topic is an unexplored area of research, which warrants further study and investigation in order to legitimise differences in the expression of power.

1.2 *Problem Statement*

This study attempts to bridge the gap in understanding of online behaviours and the power dynamics of interactions. To achieve such a result, I will investigate the possible behavioural differences between anonymous online communication and face-to-face interactions, with attention drawn to the individuals' perceptions of power within the self and of others, as well as the repercussions of these behaviours.

1.3 *Purpose of Study*

The purpose of the study is to conduct a qualitative analysis on participants aged 18 - 25 years old, mainly based in the Christchurch (NZ) vicinity that regularly engaged in online communications. Unstructured interviews will be carried out with six predetermined, open-ended questions and no less than one hour in length to establish robust research. Data will be analysed by grounded theory methods in the three areas of open, selective and theoretical

coding as developed by Glaser (1978) to generate a theory explaining the behavioural responses of individuals in online communication and the association of those behaviours with power dynamics.

1.4 Primary Research Questions

This study aims to explore the impact of the online environment on behavioural responses of individuals during various communications and to develop theories to suggest the ramifications of how power is perceived by others and by the individual. The following research questions will be flexible, with no expected or predefined outcome, as I intended to let each interview guide the next in terms of the direction of themes and evolving concepts.

- How does the online environment influence behaviour and does this have repercussions on the perception of power?
- What makes an individual appear powerful online?

In these questions, the perception of power means how an individual views another based on power related attributes. These may be external uses of force and influence, internal characteristics that induce cooperation, or the appearance of a powerful individual without the need to influence at all. The study aims to explore the power felt either within the individual or as a sense of control over others, and how this type of behaviour may differ in online communication. For example, an individual could feel they behaved differently online, or could view others as powerful by a different means of evaluation than in face-to-face interactions. The questions aim to understand the different potential reasons for behavioural

discrepancies online, as opposed to offline, and the implications of how these may impact power dynamics.

1.5 *Assumptions*

The questions posed assume that dominance is linked to power, as a distinct weighting of the literature suggests. General understanding of the concept of power is another assumption to ensure the participants and I have aligned intentions and interpretation of responses. The assumption is made that participants will answer truthfully, due to the confidentiality of the interview procedure and anonymity of the responses. The study assumes that the participants are representative of the population of 18- 25 year olds from which inferences will be made.

1.6 *Limitations*

This study identified limitations to the research as a result of snowball sampling; where the participants may not accurately represent the overall population age group by means of similar social circles. Further to this, participants will predominantly reside in the Christchurch vicinity and therefore may not represent the national demographic. Further to these assumptions, this research relies heavily on self-reporting of participants' behaviours and actions, so it is understood there is room for bias or untruthfulness, which may be an inevitable and potentially unavoidable problem when seeking data of this nature.

1.7 *Scope*

To develop influential and meaningful findings, the research has clear direction to the study. The sample of participants is restricted to the age category of 18-25 year olds. Younger demographics will not be included in this sample since the social development of that group may have not yet matured. This concept is justified through Morrow and Richards' (1996) study, who suggest individuals younger than eighteen are vulnerable through lack of knowledge and experience. Older demographics are also excluded, since they do not use online interactive sites as frequently (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith & Zickuhr, 2010).

The research will specifically exclude literature based on the topic of power and the Internet in terms of online learning communities, or direct organisational perspectives because this research is deemed less relevant to the present study. Other compensatory literature covering behaviours, as a means to reduce addiction, are vaguely relevant, however to keep the literature review concise and directly applicable to the topic, these areas will be excluded. Although some literature pertaining to behaviours online will be used, restriction is placed on this theoretical investigation to remain focused on behaviours connecting power dynamics with Internet use, computer mediated communication and the repercussions of anonymity.

1.8 *Summary*

As the Internet is becoming the fabric that binds social dynamics with societal routines, it is essential that behavioural and psychological processes in this environment be explored. Power dynamics is an equally integral aspect as it models and shapes the structure of societies

globally. To better understand this fundamental notion of power it is best to start at an individual communication level, to ensure knowledge can be advanced from the primary source. As we as a species are inherently social beings, the use and misuse of power is evident in most elements of communication, and thus the development of an understanding that aims to explore this element and how it is used in the modern day context of online becomes imperative. Society has seen a cultural shift from the desire of only basic necessities in the past; to recent times carrying an influx of Internet use. As this has been such a rapid and dramatic augmentation, society will undoubtedly be influenced by the transformation and thus implications of potential behavioural incongruities need to be explored.

From a theoretical perspective, this provides a clear opportunity to begin a field of research exploring the behavioural ramifications of the online interface on the central societal phenomenon of power. The present study aims to explore the relational mechanisms of these two concepts as a means to develop a greater understanding of the appearance of individuals power online and whether Internet communication can influence behaviour to a degree of impacting perceptions of power.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Literature Review

2.1.1 Power

Social power is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has come under review

frequently over the past century. Often when new academic works surface another perspective emerges offering new light to the ongoing inquiry. It is near impossible to reach substantive conclusions on this phenomena since the perception of power differs in each situation, environment and individual thought. However, the concept of power is important to understand because humans are innately social and desire superiority throughout life (Adler, 1956). The notion that power can be universal, yet so estranged in each situation or context, emphasises the need for ongoing research to develop a deeper understanding of the complex phenomenon of power.

Past academic conversation has argued different approaches and ideas of the phenomena known as power. Dating back to the early 1940's was Lewin's (1941) definition, which posits that power is the possibility to induce force on an individual minus the resistance of the said individual. Most research to date agrees with the idea of power influencing and controlling another, or a group of individuals. This description is expanded on by Thibaut and Kelly (1959) who see power as control over valued resources, occurring in many different social contexts, which has the capacity to affect outcomes and goals of others.

In agreement with this view is the seminal works of French and Raven (1959) who propose five bases of power that are likely to induce change in others' behaviours, attitudes, goals and values. These bases include reward, coercive, legitimate, referent and expert power. Reward power refers to the ability to mediate rewards for the influenced group. In contrast, coercive power suggests the ability to mediate punishment. Legitimate power is based on the influenced groups' belief that the influencer has the right to prescribe behaviour and opinions.

Referent power focuses on the affability between individuals. For example, if an individual likes another they will be more influenced in terms of their behaviours and attitudes. Expert power refers to the perception of superior knowledge.

These bases can be further separated into internal and external uses of power where reward, coercive and legitimate all rely on the external environment to help an individual achieve the intended influence. Lyons and Murphy (1994) describe referent and expert power as bases in which an individual can apply control and are significantly unique to an individual through personality and attributes. Thus, these two bases are internal as they rely only on an individual and how others perceive them. Lyons and Murphy (1994) extend this theory by suggesting these internal power bases obtain more effective outcomes of influence.

Boonstra and Bennebroek-Gravenhorst (1998) suggest five antecedents of power: authority, negotiation, information, mutual influence and unconscious power. These five antecedents are comparable to French and Raven's (1959) five bases of power above. Specifically, authority can be reflected through legitimate power. Negotiation is explained to be similar to reward and coercive power through the concepts of benefits and consequences. Information is associated with expert power, while mutual influence can be connected to referent power. Similarly, the factors of both Boonstra and Bennebroek-Gravenhorst (1998) and French and Raven (1959) use the external environment and internal characteristics in interpersonal exchanges as a means of increasing their perception of power.

Anderson, John and Keltner (2012) further build on the concept of power by suggesting traditional means focus on control over resources or on the grounds of decision-making as

discussed above. However, beyond this, is the idea that power is exerted through one's social position, established by an individual's psychological state. That is, an individual's perception of one's influence over others. Dunbar and Burgoon (2005) argue that these two concepts can be substitutable, although Anderson et al. (2012) disagree by using the example of a parent having control over a child's resources while also feeling a lack of influence over their child's lives. This perception of power can augment an individual's actual influence and as Bandura (1999) suggests, the more powerful one's perception is of their own influence, the more effective ways they may demonstrate and attain that power. Thus the opposite can also be supposed, if a parent feels they have little influence over their child's behaviour, this seemingly helpless perception may well hinder the degree of influence a comparative parent may use, who has more internally perceived power.

Findings from Anderson et al. (2012) help bridge the gap between internal and external factors that can explain an individual's level of power. This concept is referred to as the personal sense of power and is explained by both behavioural traits, that create a more assertive and dominant persona, as well as the sociocultural factors, including the social position of an individual in their peer group. Internally, the personal sense of power is related to one's own behavioural traits that can help an individual establish more influence over another. This can be through the projection of a more assertive nature, as opposed to an individual who has personality traits more closely related to introversion or timidity. Leikas, Lönnqvist, Verkasalo and Nissinen (2012) reaffirm this by suggesting dominant individuals who are in leadership roles are perceived to have higher levels of extraversion among their subordinates. Anderson and Kilduff (2009) also found dominant personalities appear more powerful even if their actual competence of a task was lacking. Individuals with dominant

personalities in the study behaved in particular ways in order to appear more experienced and socially skilled even if they were not as competent in reality. This internal view can also be translated to the perception of one's ability to influence others' actions, which in turn impacts their exertion of dominance (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005).

The perception of one's own power seems to have significant repercussions on an individual's exertion of power over others. Anderson and Galinsky (2006) found individuals who perceived they held a degree of power in their relationships were not as likely to use negative behavioural traits to establish that said power, such as manipulation or deceitful actions. Another negative effect found in the study as an outcome of lacking power within relationships was the perception that others' trustworthiness decreased, which could lead to potential volatility in those relationships. This is not a new concept; Raven and Kruglanski (1970) proposed that individuals are more likely to use coercive measures if they perceive themselves as powerless in order to feel a sense of power that might temporarily boost their self esteem. Bugental and Lewis (1999) reinforce this view by suggesting powerless females can misuse power as a form of compensation. They also posit that these individuals may be less competent as a result of their preoccupation with not reaching a desirable level of influence with others. Earlier works from Bugental, Lyon, Krantz and Cortez (1997) suggest this finding is also apparent in males. From a more positive perspective, those who feel they do have power in relationships have been found to have higher levels of self esteem, are healthier and live longer (Marmot, 2004).

Beyond the idea of an individual's perception of their own power comes the more external theory posed by Thibaut and Kelley (1959), which suggests that power is defined more by the

perception others have on an individual's influence. The phenomenon of power is therefore argued to be socio-relational, meaning that the extent of one's power is derived from the understanding of relationships within a peer group. Expanding on this point is the theory founded by Anderson, John, Keltner and Kring (2001) that suggest signifying status is measured by the degree of respect, influence and importance of an individual in a particular peer group. Subašić, Reynolds, Turner, Veenstra, and Haslam, (2011) reaffirm the idea of a leaders ability to influence their peer group based on the uses of power. Anderson et al. (2012) build on this through the notion that power is measured by the capacity of influence, therefore an individual may not necessarily have to exert power for others to consider them powerful. This idea can be directly translated into the area of the workplace. Leavitt (2005) proposes that influential leaders of a company need not regularly enforce commands to remain powerful; instead the perception of power is ascertained through the influenced behaviour of the personnel.

Most previous studies reviewed take a quantitative approach manipulating various parameters in order to measure power and influence. For example, Anderson and Berdahl (2002) manipulated variables of influence and control over resources to measure decision-making processes of hypothetical situations. The current research attempts to carry out a more in-depth analysis of power by offering more real-world situations to try and understand more about all the different facets and perceptions of power. As can be seen from the above review, there are many different arguments and ideologies of what pertains to be power, how power can be accurately measured, whether the perception of power reflects an individual's actual power, and how it can be expressed in different circumstances. This study aims to analyse these different situations and contexts using more enriched and meaningful data sources.

It is interesting to note the supposed idea that power can be exerted subconsciously. This concept is rarely noted in the foundation literature but seems to be an important factor to consider. Van Dijke and Poppe (2006) have a somewhat differing approach to the definition of power, suggesting two overarching categories: social power and sense of agency. The term sense of agency in context refers to the internal power of an individual to feel control over his or her own actions, and through these actions, a feeling of control over situations in the outside world (Haggard & Chambon, 2012). Social power is the idea of influence over others, as a large body of literature has shown. However, the concept of sense of agency in relation to internal power seems relatively unearthed. Lukes (2002) furthered this notion of power within the self and over others by suggesting the two concepts are completely separate from one another. The study also promotes the idea of internal power as a topic with an unclear understanding, implying further research is needed in this area.

2.1.2 Self-Efficacy (Internal Power)

Self-efficacy is a psychological paradigm developed by Bandura (1977) and has been defined as the ability to organize and integrate cognitive, behavioural and social skills in order to adapt to unpredictable situations and environments (Bandura, 1982). Thus, self-efficacy can determine thought and specifically, motivational processes (Jones & Riazi, 2011). Bandura and Schunk (1981) explains this as the degree of effort one exerts in the face of a challenge, those with low self-efficacy will soon retreat in the face of obstacles arising, however, individuals who have a high sense of self-efficacy will try harder in order to achieve the task. Lyons and Murphy (1994) describe this as the measure of an individual's belief in their

abilities, and the effort they exert in certain tasks is the cause of situational outcomes as opposed to other external factors beyond the self. Bandura (1982) builds on this concept by suggesting that the self-efficacy theory is based on the multi-directional interaction between self-referent thought, action and effect. That is, an individual's perception of efficacy is drawn from self-referent thought which is based on varying outcomes from their actions in different contextual situations.

The idea that self-efficacy more closely relates to internal power is again reaffirmed by Lyons and Murphy (1994). Their study drew from French and Raven's (1959) five bases of power and found that the internal bases of power (referent and expert) were positively related to efficacy as opposed to the external power bases of coercive, legitimate and reward which were negatively related to efficacy. This finding shows that power that is used from internal personality traits and characteristics has a much stronger weighting on peers' perceptions of the individual's power; if power is exerted through the use of the external environment the perception that the individual is themselves powerful, decreases.

Bandura (1997) offers a significant link to the concept of efficacy translating to internal power with the idea that efficacy is embedded in the belief of one's own power in order to produce preferred outcomes. Without this, Bandura argues there would be less encouragement to persist through difficult challenges. Bandura (1982) builds on this through a further conceptual link between the idea of human agency proposed by Van Dijke and Poppe (2006), and self-efficacy. He suggests that the influence of one's own behaviour comes from the ability to self-regulate personal agency and self-assurance and use these attributes effectively in order to achieve desirable outcomes.

Rotter (1967) shares a similar view through the idea of locus of control, which forms theoretical associations to the sense of agency with efficacy and power. Rotter (1967) defines locus of control as the extent an individual believes that outcomes result from his or her own behaviour. This can be translated to efficacy in the sense that individuals who believe they cannot control their action have a tendency to possess less efficacy. Zimmerman (2000) provides a conceptual link between locus of control and self-efficacy by postulating that an individual's perception of control on daily outcomes links with efficacy, as those who believe outcomes arise from their own behaviours have both high locus of control and greater efficacy. On the other hand, as Bandura (1982) explains, individuals who possess low efficacy can be preoccupied with a perceived inability to control their own actions, resulting in a higher likelihood of limited, or a hindrance on their own, capabilities as a result. Lyons and Murphy (1994) further suggest locus of control is a dimension supplementing the construct of self-efficacy.

Etzioni (1975) posits the idea of personal and positional power, where personal power is derived from their follower's perceptions as opposed to individuals with a position of authority. Further links between the use of power and efficacy are seen through the idea that self-perceptions of power are derived from one's own feelings and beliefs; these are produced from a cognitive response to achievement and adaptation, which is the process of developing efficacy (Lyons & Murphy, 1994). In more recent times, the focus of self-efficacy has shifted to a more generalised scope. Judge, Erez and Bono (1998) suggest efficacy is an individual's belief in their competence to perform in a range of situations developing the previously supposed idea of capabilities in each specific context.

There have been many differing approaches to measuring self-efficacy. Bandura and Locke (2003) offer critique on many previous methods. Although intra-individual designs have been used to effectively measure self-efficacy in the past, Bandura and Locke (2003) suggest that this design may produce misleading results since less variance is achieved, which makes causality or correlations hard to discover. Vancouver, Thompson and Williams (2001) suggest that inter-individual designs do not account for intergroup effects on efficacy, however, Bandura and Locke (2003) suggest using the appropriate controls will offset this. Chen, Gully and Eden (2001) have evaluated past self-efficacy scales in order to develop a new, more valid scale to measure efficacy, their scale is called the New General Self-Efficacy Scale (NGSE). This scale is a development from the General Self-Efficacy Scale (SGSE) through enhancement of content validity and predictive validity. This, as well as the reduced number of items in the scale, suggests a more employable approach for future research (Chen et al., 2001).

2.1.3 Predictors of Internet Use

Since the current research aims to explore the online environment as a key focus to develop an understanding of behaviour in this area, it is important to first review literature examining both the predictors and motivators for an individual to seek online exposure. Hoffman, Novak and Schlosser (2003) make a noteworthy theoretical association between the concept of locus of control and Internet use. Their study suggests that individuals with a higher internal locus of control; that is, believing their life course is determined by factors of their own control, have more positive experiences in relation to acquiring information. The opposite was also

found to be true in Iskender and Akin's (2010) study, where individuals who believed they had little control over outcomes in their life, showed less ability to regulate Internet use. Further, more negative repercussions would ensue as a result of Internet addiction, such as loneliness, lower self-esteem and poorer social interactions (Ko et al., 2006). These findings show that individuals who believe others have no influence on their lives will be more likely to have power over their environment and control their life path more prescriptively. In relation to the Internet, these individuals believe they can influence their Internet use, through controlled and reduced use. Conversely, those who do not as strongly believe in their own abilities to control situations are more likely to be less successful in terms of regulating their Internet use (Chak & Leung, 2004).

Also relating to power displays in the online environment is the study carried out by Leung (2003), suggesting individuals felt an increase in control over their environment when online which was positively associated with enjoyable experiences online. Hoffman et al. (2003) suggest too, that the feeling of controlling ones outcomes on the Internet lead to more enjoyable experiences. This is also reaffirmed in Leung's (1989) study of online gaming, where individuals expressed satisfaction from the sense of power from the ability to control their virtual environment.

Caplan (2010) theorises that individuals who seek to control their mood via means of the Internet are more compulsive and preoccupied with Internet use. Similarly, Leung (2006) suggests that using the Internet can also be a means of mood management through engaging in activities such as entertainment, information seeking and social compensation. The theory of social compensation argues that individuals who rarely make social connections offline use

the Internet to increase their interpersonal lives by building social relationships online (Gosling et al., 2011). Peter, Valkenburg and Schouten (2005) reinforce this by suggesting that online communication is a means to overcome the constraints of social anxiety, which may be experienced offline. They propose individuals go online to socially interact in order to make up for the lack of socialising or perceived social skills in face-to-face interactions.

Valkenburg and Peter (2009) offer links to social compensation by introducing the hyper-personal model, which is the disclosure and communication of personal details about the self as a result of diminished concern about how others perceive them. The study suggests this model is particularly applicable to shy or self-conscious individuals; with the disclosure of more information online being a compensatory behaviour for the lack of information disclosed offline. Yang and Brown (2013) discuss how individuals want to seek online friendships more if they report being lonely. Again this supports the theory of social compensation as a way to create more friends online when they cannot find these relationships face-to-face.

Interestingly, research has also found support in a somewhat opposing theory. The rich-get-richer hypothesis suggests that individuals who are highly sociable offline will adopt the same gregarious nature with online communications. This may be evident as individuals with pre-existing social structures and socially adaptive personalities, can more easily gain positive experiences through online social communication more so than less sociable personalities (Gosling et al., 2011). Herring et al. (2004) support the rich-get-richer theory by suggesting individuals subconsciously allow personality characteristics to show through the online setting; therefore it follows that a social individual offline will also express a social nature

online.

Barker (2009) found evidence to support both hypotheses. In support of social compensation, findings surmised that individuals with negative self-esteem used social networking sites as an alternative to communicate with other groups that they could not interact with offline. This study suggests older adolescents who feel isolated offline may try to identify with others online to gain more positive in-group relationships they do not have offline. Thus, compensatory behaviours are used online to make up for lack of interactions offline. Conversely, associations with the rich-get-richer hypothesis were also found. Strong self-esteem was found to relate to a stronger motivation to communicate online, extending the idea that individuals who are confident offline will mirror this online, through their willingness to communicate in both environments. From this, the concept emerges that both low and high self-esteemed individuals show a similar degree of motivation to engage in online interactions.

2.1.4 Computer-Mediated Communication

The interpersonal exchanges that individuals share online can be explained by the concept of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). Castells (2002) proposes that the function of active communication without geographic boundary or time restraints makes the Internet a popular medium to augment human exchanges for everyday use around the world. Derks, Fischer and Bos (2008) explore emotions in CMC; their findings suggest that emotions can be

revealed just as frequently as in offline interactions to compensate for the lack of face-to-face cues and physical nuances. This can be achieved through more emphasised verbal accounts or emoticons (Derks et al., 2008). However, these compensations lack the intensity and quality of similar face-to-face interactions (Cummings, Butler and Kraut, 2002).

Although positive emotions can be exerted to a similar degree using CMC as that of face-to-face communication (Walther, 2007), an interesting finding is that the expression of negative emotion may be more intense and displayed more explicitly through CMC (Binns, 2012). Furthermore, individuals are less likely to acknowledge negative repercussions to their emotional responses (Suler, 2004). This could be due to what Derks et al. (2008) argue as the most fundamental difference between emotions expressed through CMC versus those from face-to-face communication as the reduction of emotional embodiment. The study suggests that it is likely that individuals assume others' emotional and physical reactions may be less intense when communicating online than if they were confronted in person. This supports the theory of negative social appraisals; as one assumes others' reactions may be less intense online, they too may feel a sense of reduced emotional reaction to negativity during CMC.

Another characteristic of CMC is the limiting of spontaneity while allowing for control. Walther (2007) builds on this argument by suggesting CMC is a facilitator of editing, preference and convenience. That is, individuals engaging in CMC present themselves in a positive way through selectively revealing attitudes and aspects of the self that are considered socially acceptable and desirable. Further, individuals have the ability to consider and manage the desired extent of emotion (Derks et al. 2008). The hyper-personal model developed by Walther (1996) has been used in an extensive body of literature. It assumes that in mediums

that have limited interpersonal cues, such as online, individuals are more likely to form better assumptions and opinions about an individual than they would if the interaction were face-to-face with more available non-verbal cues to judge character. This is an extension of the notion of social judgement theory discussed by Cooksey (1996) who proposes that individuals make inferences about others in a social situation based on all available cues.

2.1.5 Anonymity Online

As social communications and interactions have increasingly become a part of computer technology, it is important to understand the possibilities CMC provides through anonymity. Christopherson (2007) argues that there can be both positive and negative aspects of anonymity; with one of the benefits being a space provided for individuals to have their own privacy. Jones (2004) reinforces this idea suggesting anonymity is useful when an individual requires protection of their identity, possibly fearing negative feedback or retaliation. Nevertheless, Davenport (2002) supports the view that anonymous communication has more disadvantages outweighing the positive aspects. He suggests CMC is an overt anti-establishment and offers the opportunity for criminal acts and anti-social behaviours to take place. Davenport (2002) also discusses anonymity protocols and tools, however these, along with the use of spyware and the occurrence of hacker attacks, fall outside the scope of this study, which aims to explore anonymity and behaviours online specifically through interactions and CMC.

According to Joinson (2001), anonymity is a fundamental aspect explaining CMC behaviour. The study suggests participants divulge considerably more personal information when they

are visually anonymous. Joinson (2001) suggests that this is due to the interplay between anonymity and an increased private self-awareness. Matheson and Zanna (1988) reaffirm this view suggesting greater self-disclosure occurs because of both a heightened private self-awareness, and a reduced sense of public self-awareness, meaning an individual is less preoccupied with peer judgements, which can be experienced with CMC. This could also explain why individuals feel less social anxiety and desirability, and higher self-esteem when they are anonymous, as Joinson (1999) found, referring to this as disinhibition.

Christopherson (2007) argues an important factor that explains and predicts behaviour in CMC is the Social Identity Model of De-individuation Effects (SIDE) theory. This theory comprises two factors that impact how anonymity is applied in CMC; these are the cognitive component and the strategic component. The cognitive component is centred on the idea that anonymity is the mediator between group dynamics; comprising an individual's actions with that said group, and the impact of an individual's identity within the same group (Joinson 2000). Anonymity is argued to increase the impact of social norms when an individual has a strong sense of social identity. However, for those who perceive their own personal identity as high, the impact of social norms lessens (Spears & Lea, 1992). The strategic component refers to using anonymity deliberately to reap the benefits of CMC, such as equalisation or improved social position (Spears & Lea, 1994). Spears, Lea, Corneliussen, Postmes and Haar (2002) build on this idea suggesting that minority groups use anonymity to express their thoughts and views that are typically contrasting to majority group thought. However this will only occur if the content is considered a norm in the minority group (Spears et al., 2002). For example, if an online community shared an interest for peculiar subjects, in the forum itself, discussion of these topics would be welcomed, however in different areas of the online

interface the same discussion may not be as accepted and thus individuals may be less inclined to express their thoughts.

Building on this is the seminal works of Suler (2004) who developed a fundamental theory to explain different behaviours expressed online compared to face-to-face communication, termed the online disinhibition effect. Suler (2004) argues that there can be two forms of disinhibition, a form that portrays acts of kindness and the disclosure of personal information such as an individual's emotion and fears, referred to as benign disinhibition. This is extended in Bargh, McKenna and Fitzsimons (2002) research whom discuss the "stranger on a train" phenomenon by which individuals share intimate details with others they may never encounter again. The opposing form is anti-social behaviours, where abusive and aggressive language can be used as well as spaces of pornography and crime, described as toxic disinhibition (Suler, 2004). Binns (2012) reaffirms the notion of toxic disinhibition through signifying the illicit environment as a place one would only desire to go online. The disinhibition effect is made up of the interplay between six factors to help understand the reasons that individuals may act in certain ways in response to varying contexts and situations. These six factors include dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination and minimization of authority (Suler, 2004).

Dissociative anonymity is the opportunity to create a clear divide in behaviours that are usually expressed face-to-face when a known identity is attached, compared to what is disclosed in an online setting (Suler, 2004). The idea that information presented online has no connection to the individual decreases the potential consequences associated and thus behaviour such as self-disclosure may be altered (Matheson & Zanna, 1988). The theory of

dissociation proposes that individuals do not have to take responsibility for their online behaviour as they do with their offline identity (Suler, 2004). Hollenbaugh and Everett (2013) refers to this notion as discursive anonymity, and suggest individuals use identity management tools in order to maintain this anonymity.

Christopherson (2007) furthers this through the definition of anonymity as the inability of peers to identify an individual. Hayne and Rice (1997) suggest that anonymity is divided into the two categories of technical anonymity and social anonymity. Technical anonymity is the elimination of information that could identify an individual, this could be such material as one's name or photograph. Social anonymity indicates the perception of an individual as being unidentifiable to others, due to a lack of cues being presented for peers to identify an individual in a social context. Previous literature has argued anonymity as having both positive and negative effects, with early works spotlighting the destructive side, finding increases in aggressive portrayals (Pinsonneault & Heppel, 1998; Zimbardo, 1969). However anonymity can also have an important positive influence on psychological well-being (Jessup & George, 1997).

Christopherson (2007) also explains other positive aspects of anonymity through the theory of catharsis; this refers to the expression of thoughts and feelings, and is translatable to Internet communication. When an individual is anonymous they can express secret thoughts and emotions without being identified or judged by their peers. The notion of catharsis is reiterated in Mitchelstein's (2011) study, which found participants mainly posted as a result of self-expression and catharsis. Another element of anonymity posed by Christopherson (2007) is that of autonomy. This theory allows for individuals to experience a sense of

freedom through trying new taboo behaviours and actions exclusive of consequence or disapproval. The theory of autonomy with reference to anonymity is also found in Maczewski's (2002) study, which found that autonomy can also result in the development of an individual's identity. The findings suggest that being anonymous allows individuals to more freely choose what online social groups they can be a part of, without consequence, and this online space offered more opportunity to freely express thoughts and emotions than face-to-face situations, aiding in personal development. Christopherson (2007) argues that this is healthy for an individual as it can support the development of varied perspectives on life and ultimately lead to a positive augmentation in behaviour.

Invisibility is a subset of anonymity which refers to when an individual can still have their identity attached to what they are saying while remaining physically invisible (Suler, 2004). Hollenbargh and Everett (2013) term this visual anonymity, and suggest this is the degree in which others can visually identify and hear an individual (Scott, 2004). Because of invisibility made available by CMC, individuals do not have to be as concerned about their appearances or the sound of their speech as these characteristics are removed from the online interaction (Suler, 2004).

Asynchronicity, also termed asynchronous communication, is the idea that interactions with other individuals do not have to occur simultaneously. This allows for individuals to structure responses and typically craft more carefully what is said (Vonderwell, 2003). This can help an individual process information easier to aid in such activities as learning environments (Hrastinski, 2008). Suler (2004) argues that this delay in feedback could facilitate an individual's thought processes toward more overt expressions of benign and toxic

disinhibition which disregard acceptable social norms.

Solipsistic introjection is an extension of Walther's (1996) hyper-personal model as discussed above. This theory postulates that an individual can either consciously or subconsciously ascribe a visual image to their online peer, which may or may not be factual. This is not only based on how the peer represents themselves in the online communication, but also from the individual's personal expectations, desires and to a degree, requirements (Suler, 2004).

Dissociative imagination is closely associated with the online gaming world. Individuals can believe that their identities online are completely detached from who they are offline and therefore believe that whatever occurs online cannot affect reality. Further to this, individuals may believe that specific rules and norms presented online do not apply offline, again influencing differences in behaviour (Suler, 2004). Yee (2006) extends this suggesting that online gamers enjoy the component of immersion where individual's can completely detach their identity to form a new persona.

The idea of rules having differing impacts in the two environments of online and offline can extend to the last factor of the disinhibition effect, which is the idea that status and authority is minimized online. Suler (2004) suggests that individuals who possess authority offline express such power through body language, their dress code and other such visual and verbal cues, however in an online environment these cues are absent and thus the impression of their authority is quickly diminished. Dubrovsky, Kiesler and Sethna (1991) reaffirm the idea of lessened hierarchy through the equalisation hypothesis. This theory suggests that the Internet creates equal grounds for any of its members. As physical appearance and social power are

based on important cues in communication, it is assumed that in CMC, when these cues are removed, so is the display of social power (Sproull & Kiesler, 1991), therefore leading to an equal playing field.

Further, the Internet is an environment that welcomes equality of freedom of speech. Thus, all individuals have an equal opportunity to voice their opinion regardless of status, wealth, race or gender. The Internet itself has been designed with no core control or boundaries so creates an atmosphere and philosophy that thrives on the ideal of minimal authority (Suler, 2004). Expanding on this, Postmes and Spears (2002) suggest that individuals with lower status offline behave in ways online that would not be typical of their offline social groups. Thus, Dubrovsky et al. (1991) suggest that those with less power offline, such as minority group members, should feel an increased sense of power online. Limitations of the study carried out by Dubrovsky et al. (1991) include the separation of gender in the study, as well as the laboratory design, limiting the generalisability to real-world impacts. Yet, the equalisation hypothesis was contradicted by Weisband (1993) through the finding that high status members of a group held more influence in CMC than in face-to-face interaction.

2.1.6 Summary

The past research discussing power is divided in opinion. Early pivotal findings of French and Raven (1959) signified five bases of power as expert, referent, legitimate, coercive and reward. The more recent theory that power can be conveyed as an internal perception through sense of agency and self-efficacy has been proposed by Van Dijke and Poppe (2006). The fundamental areas of power explored include Etzioni's (1975) idea that power can be divided

into positional and personal forms of power. These serve as two broad categories, which underpin the fundamental theory of power comprising both external factors and internal factors that contribute to the perception of one's sense of power. External factors found to influence one's environment, and internal factors portrayed as an individual's behavioural traits, attributes and beliefs of control, are found to increase the perception of power within that individual.

There is no single consensus for the predictors of Internet use, although resonating elements relating to the use of power online include the theories of controlling the environment (Leung, 2003), mood management (Leung, 2006), compensatory behaviour (Yang & Brown, 2013) and the rich-get-richer hypothesis posed by Gosling et al. (2011). The ability to control the environment is a direct correlation with power since an individual may feel satisfaction with the online environment through the ability to compensate for the lack of control they have in their real, offline lives. Mood management has also been found to be associated with the idea of social compensation in order to feel a sense of internal power and confidence (Leung, 2006). Although there is much support for compensatory behaviours online, the rich-get-richer hypothesis is also relevant because this theory suggests that the online environment enhances an individual's offline behaviour (Gosling et al., 2011).

Since the current study specifically explores interactions online, it is imperative to understand the concept of CMC. The fundamental aspects of this theory include the elements of reduced visual and verbal cues, greater freedom of expression and the opportunity to be anonymous. All of these elements help to answer underlying questions of why individuals express power online. Anonymity allows the expression of behaviours that would otherwise be disapproved

of by authority figures in society, because there is a lack of consequence as a result of decreased cues identifying an individual.

Anonymity is especially interesting to understand because it explores behaviours of an individual when the content conveyed has no real connection to their known identity. This concept has been argued to have both positive (Jones, 2004) and negative (Davenport, 2002) outcomes, however it is interesting to note the theories posed that attempt to explain behaviours online that rely on anonymity as a mediator. Fundamental theories reviewed include the online disinhibition effect founded by Suler (2004) and the SIDE theory posed by Christopherson (2007). Both these theories include connections to power. The disinhibition effect identifies the decreased impact of influencing behaviours from authority members and the idea that the online environment creates an equal playing field for its members. The SIDE theory discusses the social influence of an individual's identity and how strategic actions can be employed for the beneficial outcomes of being anonymous.

With the rapidly changing online environment and the increasing array of online communication applications, it is important to continue to review both the positive and negative behaviours being applied and the outcomes that can be seen to arise from these behaviours as a response to different power dichotomies.

2.2 *Project Justification*

It is evident from the multitude of reviewed literature that power is a fragmented and complex phenomenon that incorporates many differing definitions. The ability to be able to conceptualise the varying approaches into a framework that also incorporates the online

environment would be undoubtedly beneficial to society as a means to advance understanding and knowledge. It is clear from the literature that there remains a somewhat divided approach to power, with many authors concentrating on either external uses of influences or self-efficacy, which this study aims to cement as a sense of Internal power. Therefore, it is important to visualise a more holistic sense of the phenomenon of power in order to gain essential insights into the behavioural responses and repercussions of this notion in cyberspace, which the present research aims to achieve.

It is also apparent that the Internet has become a global phenomenon that is now considered a necessity in many societies. The literature has shown many different underlying reasons of Internet use and the repercussions this may have when individuals choose to remain unidentifiable to others. However, the gap remains evident in relation to behavioural responses when power is considered. This clear divide in the literature between online communication and power dynamics is both essential and fundamental to explore, as both aspects are equally relevant and ubiquitous in today's society. The present research aims to bridge this conceptual division through the investigation of the phenomenon of power in the online environment, with an emphasis on behavioural responses that could explain any discrepancies with the offline world.

This study aims to advance knowledge through a useful framework from a managerial perspective, a practical standpoint, and for the literature. Insights drawn from this research will aim to provide a knowledge base centred on social dynamics from internal and external power influences, and explore how behaviours compare online and offline. This research will not only close the gap in the literature, but also offer a deeper and more enhanced understanding of individual's psychosomatic processes through online engagement and the impact this has on power perceptions.

3 Research Methodology

3.1 Philosophical position

The philosophical position of this research takes an interpretivist approach. The type of data needed to carry out this approach warrants the use of a qualitative design. This is justified through the nature of the research, which aimed to explore subjective experiences of a small number of participants to form in-depth interpretations through detailed investigation of the individuals. This approach best answers the research questions, which are exploratory through the investigation of social behaviours in the online environment and whether this influences individual's perceptions of power and the appearance of power among individuals. Urquhart (2013) describes the approach as a means to link interpretations of social practices and the notion of coding; this offers commensurability between the two concepts as they both use the same underlying philosophy. The goal of this research is to generate more of an understanding through the focus of specific and unique deviants in individuals' responses. The knowledge investigated through this position is from relative meanings bounded by context, value, time and culture and from interactive cooperation with the researcher (Collins 2010; Myers 2008; Pizam & Mansfield 1999). An interpretivist framework is used to investigate, interpret and explore such realities not only as socially constructed, but also complex and ever changing worlds (Tuli 2011). The type of information sought understands what people thought and how they reacted in situations.

The ontology of this approach is outlined by Orlikowski and Baroudi (1991) as subjective

social and physical worlds, which only exist through human action. This approach sees reality as a social and unique construct and can only be understood through the actors contributing to that reality (Orlikowski & Baroudi 1991). In this sense the world is dependent on many subjective experiences and participants are able to make meaning of their own realities through the construction of knowledge by practice, as well as the ability to freely express subjective views (Tuli 2011).

Lin (1998) explain the epistemology of this position as a way of creating socially distinctive constructs from the field by investigation of the specific context of research; in this sense interpretations are constructed from practices and their meanings and thus less likely to be compromised by predetermined notions. This approach assumes the researcher uses perceptions to navigate through embedded meanings of participants' experiences (Merriman 1998). Concepts are generally derived from the field in order to construct and evaluate knowledge based on meanings and experiences as a means to study a phenomenon within a particular social setting (Orlikowski & Baroudi 1991).

3.2 *Grounded Theory*

In terms of the specific methodological approach, grounded theory was employed, as it is best suited to the research design. Charmaz (2011) describes grounded theory as a method used to inductively understand qualitative data. This is achieved through the process of coding the data in order to generate relationships between concepts and thus a theory emerges (Urquhart, 2013). This theory is therefore grounded in the data and aims to include one or two core constructs as a means to provide more richness and depth (Gregor 2006).

The key features of grounded theory are outlined by Dey (1999) and Cresswell (1998) and include the principle aim of this methodology, as stated above to be discovering a theory. Preconceived theoretical ideas need to be disregarded in an attempt to let the fundamental theory emerge. The theory developed in the current study focuses on individual's interactions online and the phenomenon of power, providing credible links between these concepts, developed through the data from the interviews. Data analysis of grounded theory begins when the data becomes available and remains systematic and simultaneous to achieve a valid and robust theory. The identification and connection of concepts and categories provides a basis for further data gathering based on the emerging themes through the method of theoretical sampling and concludes when no new concepts emerge; termed as data saturation. The resulting theory can be expressed through either a narrative framework or a set of propositions and is formed from the data analysis process using open coding, selective coding and theoretical coding as outlined by Glaser (1978). Extending this research is Goulding (1998) who suggests grounded theory is formed from symbolic social interaction by proposing behaviour that involves various forms of communication including both verbal and non-verbal cues. Urquhart (2013) suggests that grounded theory is best utilized when topics are undefined and relatively unexplored.

As behavioural influences of online interactions and power perceptions comprise as the main concepts of the present study, this methodology seems both fitting and enhancing. This research explored patterns in behaviours both verbally and symbolically in an attempt to develop a deeper understanding of both conscious and subconscious perceptions of power and behavioural discrepancies. Analyzing these two aspects collectively gave more breadth and

depth to the information collated and contributed to the further development of more substantiated and representative themes. As the data was collected, analysis was carried out simultaneously to ensure a continuous flow of the emerging ideas and concepts to remain salient as the data was processed. The theories that emerged from the research were then compared with previous literature on both sides of the research, including power itself and online interactions to see if there was a connection to either. The development of new concepts is directly related to grounded theory as opposed to improving existing phenomena. This research explored perceptions of power and influenced behaviour online, as there is no current theory to denote if the online environment influences the manifestation of power perceptions or what considerations influence an individual's power online.

Charmaz (2003) suggests grounded theory methods generally consist of inductive strategies. Beginning with participants' experiences and symbolic social cues as data, a more progressive analysis was developed into conceptual categories that then explained the data and identified patterns and emerging relationships. Theoretical sampling is a main aspect contributing to grounded theory as this process decides the future direction of data collection as a means to reach data saturation and create a theory. The ability to be theoretically sensitive is imperative in this process to be truly immersed in the field of study in order for specific contexts to be thoroughly understood (Glaser 1978).

The strength of grounded theory as mentioned by Urquhart (2013) is the usefulness for analyzing interviews through the generation of concepts arising from a close understanding of what individuals are saying. In this sense, the methodology aimed to analytically develop theories from human behaviour. Furthering this is the idea grounded theory can develop

confirmation from the data for a concept to be produced, by providing many different cases of evidence to support the emerging theory. This current study will employ grounded theory as a theory based design, through a pure grounded theory approach and using theoretical sampling.

3.3 *Qualitative Design*

This research aimed to develop an understanding of online behaviours and the association with the phenomenon of power, rather than proving or disproving a said theory. The hope was to gain insights through the exploration of patterns and concepts in behaviours both online and offline, which is best achieved through qualitative design, as this type of analysis is used to describe different paths that led to contextual outcomes (Maxwell 1998). Van't Riet, Berg, Hiddema and Sol (2001) explain that qualitative research is explorative in nature and investigates the different impacts of phenomena, while questioning why they might exist. This is appropriate to the proposed study as it endeavoured to find emerging theories to explain why individuals exert behaviours differently online as opposed to offline and how this may impact perceptions of individuals' power.

The benefits of qualitative methods are best when the subject of study cannot be controlled or is poorly defined (Black, 1994). As this research is focused on the online environment and power variables, which include many different facets and interpretations, a qualitative design approach seems best suited. Baxter and Jack (2008) suggest that qualitative research allows for the deconstruction and following reform of phenomena in order to develop theories. Furthering this is the idea that topics are explored better through qualitative research rather

than quantitative in more complex situations where relevant variables associated with an outcome are not apparent; qualitative design serves to develop more of an understanding of the phenomenon (Black, 1994). Again the current topic fits into these parameters appropriately as there is no expected outcome or anticipated explanation of online behaviours and the perception of power.

A heavy weighting of previous research about online interactions specifically has remained quantitative. This research proposes to offer a unique approach and shed light on the research that has not yet been explored through a methodology that has rarely been used in this context. By using a qualitative design the aim is to develop more of a context and understanding that can build around the research topic. Fahy (2003) also states the lack of attention in the area of online interaction is because of the fast evolution of online technologies on which it is based. This shows a clear indication that little research has looked at this, which further reinforces the gap in the literature that this study aims to fill with a qualitative approach.

4 Research design and methods

4.1 Participants

The rapid increase in the use of social networking sites through the past years has shown both the popularity and importance of these mediums as an integral form of communication, especially in the eyes of young adults (Wilson, Fornasier & White, 2010). Lenhart et al. (2010) reaffirm this view through their findings that 72 percent of 18-29 year olds use social

networking websites, making them the highest users of online communication along with teenagers. Lenhart et al. (2010) also found this demographic to show significantly higher usage rates than 30-49 year olds in terms of mobile web use, wireless use and social networking engagement. This means they are more technologically savvy due to growing up in an age where the digital world is part of daily life. The transition from a high school age into adulthood can be complex and perplexing, where some individuals may be less prepared due to lack of peer group belonging (Barker, 2009). The increased number of single status individuals compared with older age brackets (Soons & Liefbroer, 2008) left an area to be explored in terms of their expressions of power to potentially impress or dominate peers in online settings. Anderson (2001) suggests that Internet dependence is becoming an increasing problem, especially for tertiary students, who would generally fit the specified age description.

The focused demographic are at stages of significant development through establishing relationships and maintaining past interconnections through university life, or the beginnings of their first professional careers. Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter and Espinoza (2008) suggest that emerging adults connect their worlds of online and offline through communication to maintain friendships, even using the Internet to mitigate offline issues. Anderson (2001) extends this by exploring the idea that college students may have developmental issues, including forming new friendships and their own identity as a result of excessive Internet use. Mazalin and Moore (2004) also suggest that high Internet use may reduce opportunities for face-to-face interactions, which could hinder social learning and identity development. This is because of the reduction in nuances that face-to-face communication offers such as facial expressions and body language (Moody, 2001).

Mcmillan and Morrison (2008) found in their study that emerging adults did not try to form a new identity but instead reaffirm their existing offline persona. The idea that the Internet could be a means of disruption in terms of development particularly with regard to identity in emerging adults is an interesting query and can relate significantly to online behaviours and the repercussions on the perception of power.

4.2 *Sampling*

Criteria sampling will be used in terms of the outlined participant pool regarding the age category of 18-25 years. Initially a snowball sampling method was taken to reach a wide range of participants and begin the evolution of data collection. This consisted of requesting initial participants to pass on information about the study to other potential respondents. Word of the study also spread through peers and colleagues, which generated further referrals. Hendricks, Blanken and Adriaans (1992) examine how this technique of sampling is widely used for primarily exploratory research such as qualitative design as opposed to proving or disproving a hypothesis. This method in particular can be most effective when the topic is of sensitive nature and a degree of trust is beneficial (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). As this current study explores the inner workings of power and the behavioural influences behind such actions, it would not be ambiguous to suggest that this area could benefit in similar ways to other topics discussing sensitive areas. This sampling method does require social visibility in order to locate the target population. As the current study is being completed at the University of Canterbury, the population pool of other students mostly fit in accordance with the age criteria of 18-25.

Advantages of using this sampling method include the potential for participants to feel more comfortable and trusting of the researcher because of the indirect link between them (Biernacki & Waldorf 1981). Further to this, research is open to gain truer insights through the higher likelihood of legitimate responses (Fauger & Sargeant, 1997). At the induction of this study, data gathering was purely investigative and began with known respondents whom met the research criteria of aging between 18-25 and having social interactions both online and offline. Referral chains were developed at this stage and controlled in order to pursue revelatory avenues with the aim to reach data saturation. At this point, as Biernacki and Waldorf (1981) suggest, it was important to find participants that met general characteristics and were typical of the demographic in order to gain a representative sample.

From here, to best synthesize with the grounded theory approach, theoretical sampling was employed. This method involved exploring specific processes and patterns that begin to transpire. As Draucker, Martsof, Ross and Rusk (2007) propose, theoretical sampling is guided by emerging theories. These conceptualizations provided a foundation for further examination (Biernacki & Waldorf 1981). An advantage of theoretical sampling includes the ability to constantly compare instances within a category while helping to add depth to particular categories by following a certain analytical path. The purpose of theoretical sampling is to develop a more substantiated theory through the process of constant comparison to allow for a wider scope of analysis by sampling more types of data (Urquhart 2013). The process of theoretical sampling in this study overlapped with data collection and analysis to answer the questions suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967), including the consideration of the next group or subgroup to focus on in terms of data collection and as

justification as to the theoretical purpose guiding that decision. Another advantage of theoretical sampling is to help understand variations in the data to either solidify a theory based on similar data matches, or develop the limits of a theory from varying data. From the initial interviews data collection was directed based on the emerging concepts of the analysis. This process of establishing sampling requirements for the next interview optimized theoretical sampling and was essential in the development of the core categories that effectively answered how actions influenced the online environment and the repercussions of the perception and appearance of power in the self and others.

4.3 Procedure

Twelve interviews were taken out before achieving data saturation. These interviews were in depth and unstructured, lasting between sixty and one hundred and fifty minutes each. Six predetermined questions were asked, with the participant providing the guidance of discussion. Prior to questioning, the participant was requested to use recent examples, which they could clearly recall, to be accurate as well as maintain relevance for the age bracket. To begin, two questions were asked based on offline interactions, these were:

- “In face-to-face social interactions, do you feel more or less dominant within yourself and in terms of others, and do you see this as positive or negative? Explain the reasons why.”
- “Outline which specific face-to-face circumstances within the past month where you have felt significantly more or less dominant and how does this make you feel?”

After the participant had explained offline behaviours in sufficient context, questions were then centred on online interactions. These questions were similar to the previous:

- “Do you feel as though you have ever asserted dominance either within yourself or over others online?”
- “Have you ever felt powerful or powerless online? If so, please share at least one example.”

As the examination reached data exhaustion in terms of online behaviours, comparative questions of face-to-face communication and online communication were asked. These included the two questions:

- “Do you feel you behave at all differently in face-to-face communication as opposed to online interaction in terms of expressing power or dominance? This could be within yourself and/or over others.”
- “Do you feel your personality is mirrored online in comparison to offline? Why or why not?”

The purpose of these questions was to indirectly explore links to behavioural intentions of power. Verbal and non-verbal cues were analyzed and noted into the transcripts for further exploration as to how and why they might be interacting in specific ways. The interviews remained as a discussion with no judgment and in a comfortable environment in order to

reduce anxiety of the topic and gain accurate and truthful answers. The explanation underpinning these interview questions was to get a sense of dominance, or lack thereof, portrayed in an individual's life and within the self, along with the repercussions of this. This helped to develop further understanding of the online environment and how behaviours can be influenced in this setting, leading to repercussions of different power dynamics and perceptions of individual's power.

Each interview took place in either a discussion room on the University of Canterbury campus or a location café and was video recorded. This was vital to analyze the intention of each answer in-depth through both body language and visual cues. In this sense, notes of how each participant responded were essential. Each recording was used to transcribe completely and effectively, and was a basis to refer back at the stage of analysis. This way enhanced analysis through the understanding of participant's responses and was the cause of conceptual breakthroughs that could not have been reached on verbal answers alone; this offered a more holistic and superior reference.

4.4 *Data Analysis*

The aim of the research was to investigate how the online environment may influence behaviour and if there were repercussions on the perception of power, as well as what it is that influences manifestations of an individual's power. Many approaches and tools were used in an attempt to explore these questions and develop theories that enhance the understanding of the subject. As explained in detail earlier, grounded theory was used through inductive strategies to analyze the data as it presents itself. After data analysis, further

exploration of the literature was carried out in order to determine where new theories emerged within the existing discipline. As Miller (2000) suggests, beginning data analysis, data must be organized through coding the text as a means to dissect information into manageable conceptual categories to be further explored and developed. Coding was carried out both manually and with the aid of NVivo software until data saturation was reached.

4.5 *Approach*

In accordance with interpretivism, an inductive approach was carried out. This was a means to orientate research toward the understanding of the behaviours and if they are influenced by online environments, and how this may affect the phenomenon of power in social dynamics. This approach allows for a higher validity as it is focused on developing an in-depth understanding of the research problem and its distinctive context (Ulin, Robinson & Tolley 2005).

The purposes for using an inductive study are outlined by Thomas (2006) as a process to summarize raw data, develop concise associations between the research problem and the summarized findings and to develop a framework, concept or theme from the experiences evident in participants' responses. This inductive approach is consistent with the qualitative research design and grounded theory methodology as a means of clarification and emergent examination (Charmaz, 2011). As the qualitative design relies on personal contact with participants, the creation of relationships can help build a deeper understanding and greater insight with regard to the context of the study, thus adding substantially to the data (Ulin et al., 2004). Thomas (2006) reinforces this by suggesting this approach can yield both valid and

reliable results.

4.6 *Coding*

Coding refers to a logical process of identifying and associating themes and patterns to the data, which form relationships that allow for the development of a theory (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The current study specifically used bottom up coding, a concept referring to codes arising from the data as opposed to the literature as other strategies such a top down coding would suggest (Urquhart 2013). Initial coded categories in the present study were simple concepts that were attached to exerts' from participant transcriptions, the process of developing associations between these codes is what created the emergent theories of the study.

In accordance with the grounded theory method, two approaches to coding can be taken; these are either the Glaserian or the Straussian strands. This study has focused on the Glaserian side by using the three aspects of coding; open, selective and theoretical. Justification for this approach was to ensure developed conceptualizations were not restricted by prescribed molds that the Straussian strand may suggest (Urquhart 2013). As Glaser (1978) suggests, the process of coding in this study was separated into open, selective and theoretical subsets. Primarily the objective was to attach codes to the data with an open mind to see what the data would say. These codes were then clustered into larger groupings as a basis for shaping a theory. Theoretical codes were achieved through the creation of relationships and associations between the grouped categories. The act of finding constructs, creating links between them and considering the nature of the associations created a theory,

which is the underlying aim of grounded theory and the current research.

To expand on Glaser's (1978) summary open coding is cohesive across both strands and is widely agreed upon as the process used in the initial stages of data examination, with the objective to develop provisional concepts. Siccama and Penna (2008) reaffirm this concept of open coding by suggesting it is the preliminary process of assigning values to different demographical attributes to a particular participant. From here open coding can be used to search these general attributes across all data. Open coding is developed here to be the process of reading text carefully to discover ideas to code. Through this process, broad and emerging categories are formed. Draucker et al. (2007) suggest at this stage the data will speak to the researcher through the uncovering of relevant categories by systematically moving through each transcript. In this sense the data is analysed in every way possible, free of any preconceptions in an iterative and reflexive way, initially starting from descriptive codes and developing these into more analytical codes (Urquhart, 2013).

When no new codes appear and the same recurring themes start to emerge, data saturation is achieved and selective coding takes places (Glaser, 1978). Selective coding under the Glaserian approach is noticeably different from the Straussian, so it was important to understand the specific aspects of the Glaserian strategy, which this study endeavoured to achieve. At this stage, the process of scaling up the codes as previously mentioned was carried out in order to achieve a substantiated level of abstraction. This process involved an in-depth understanding of other existing theories in the same field of study in order to answer the research questions posed by the study, including the influence of the online medium on behaviours and what repercussions were found on the perception of power. As the nature of

this coding process is ‘bottom-up’ many groupings were made to allow for the specific themes to emerge.

The last stage as recommended by Glaser (1978) is theoretical coding. This aspect was used in the study to focus on the relationships between codes, which ultimately led to the establishment of the study’s theory outlined by multiple themes. At this stage it was the many interconnections between different codes that made ideas relevant and allowed for this development to transpire. Glaser (1978) suggests three different sources for connections between these codes: between other categories, from the literature in the corresponding field of study or through theoretical codes in the form of coding families.

Throughout the process of coding, it was imperative to not only connect the different categories but also the importance of the labels assigned to the codes as a means to develop relationships between the constructs as outlined by Urquhart (2013). Upon reflection, the concept of constant comparison was also vital for the study’s development. This process as the title suggest, comprised of continuously comparing instances of data labeled under the same category. Boeije (2002) suggests that this process is essential in the process of developing a theory, which is grounded in the data. Urquhart (2013) extends this by theorizing that this interplay allows meaning and the construction of concepts to be consistently reviewed, which in turn allows for a fuller and richer understanding of subtle differences that a category may consist of. These coding techniques and processes developed by Glaser (1978) were imperative in the development of the study’s substantiated and robust themes and theory.

4.7 *Nvivo*

Nvivo is qualitative analysis software that can improve and expand analytical possibilities (Kan & Parry, 2004). Although this software does not directly analyse the data, it was a useful tool throughout data collection and analysis. Nvivo was used to help aid in the exploration of patterns in the data as well as storing transcripts for referral throughout the analysis. The storing of classified transcripts in the one system was beneficial to easily compare developing themes between individuals.

Benefits of the NVivo software have been discussed in Welsh (2002) and are in accordance with the current study. These include the ability to aid in the accuracy and transparency of the data while also ensuring a more rigid and valid data analysis process. NVivo is user friendly through the simple to use functions such as the importing of documents, assigning nodes to excerpts from the transcripts and quickly identifiable codes that could be referred to. Morrison and Moir (1998) agree that this software is a useful facilitator of the data analysis process by providing ways to count whom said what and when, enabling reliable information and general categories to be sought. Searching terms of attributes of participants was made simple without the risk of human error, in this sense NVivo provides consistency of findings through data organisation as all occurrences of a particular term can be found (Ozkan, 2004). Although the final conceptual themes were reached manually, there is much evidence to reaffirm the notion that the use of NVivo is beneficial for efficiently organising data, systematically exploring basic materials through searching tools and to increase the validity of the study by improving thoroughness of data analysis (Welsh, 2002). Although thematic ideas and deeper understanding remain as a manual necessity, Siccama and Penna (2008) reiterate that NVivo

can ensure the appropriate data is used, achieving the best possible, and more valid outcomes through the appropriate organisation of data, the use of sound and extensive enquiries, essential for reaching data saturation.

4.8 *Ethical considerations*

It is understood that ethics is an important factor in research such as this, as there is involvement of human subjects. Deception was avoided by the transparent nature and description of the interview, allowing each participant to understand the purpose of the study and intended objectives to explore online behaviours and power perceptions online and offline. Full acceptance and consent was sought before beginning the interview. Before commencing the interview, participants were asked if they were comfortable with the video recording, if they were not, no video recording would have been taken. All participants of this study consented to the video recording. To remain strictly confidential, only the supervisor and I had access to this data, as it remains secure under password protection. I am the only one who knows the identity of the participants and my supervisor only had authorized access at the stage of anonymity. The recordings remain under password protection on the UC server only, and will be deleted along with all other material after five years.

As the subject matter of this study had the potential to cause some emotional risk to the participant, sensitivity to all interviews was ensured to remain objective and non-judgmental. Participants were respected throughout the interview process ensuring comfort with the questioning and direction of the discussion. Upon commencement of the interview, information and access to the counseling services offered at the University were made

available had they needed it. As a follow up for each interview, participants were given the option to review their transcript as a means to see the data and they had the opportunity to make any comments. Participation for the study was voluntary and respondents had the right to withdraw at any stage without judgement or penalty, however this was not an issue. Participants who wished to be involved with the study were required to sign a consent form outlining their understanding of involvement and rights as a respondent. The project before commencement was reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee.

5 Findings

5.1 Anonymity

A central and recurring theme in the current research suggests that individuals communicate and behave differently when they are anonymous online compared to when they have information identifying them attached to the content posted. With regard to online gaming, it appears that in first person shooter games such as Call of Duty and Battlefield, the difference in behaviour is typically associated with more aggressive and confrontational attitudes. These anti-social type behaviours appear to be widely accepted by peers among many online gaming communities, which could be the reason for such prominence.

Bill: "...for me I was like nah like this is my time to get raging and just um just be offensive but if I'm myself on facebook... I'm representing who I am so obviously I'm the same as I am in person"

Interestingly, respondents who were involved in role-playing type games such as World Of Warcraft (WOW) and Grand Theft Auto (GTA) did not record the same hostile attitudes, however these participants were not as likely to engage in communication. For them it was an escape activity to relax so interactions with others were being avoided. All participants who did engage in interaction with other gamers, as their favoured way to game, showed examples of satisfaction from the ability to express certain thoughts and feelings that would not necessarily be socially accepted. This is related to the notion of freedom of expression, exemplified in the following exert:

Bill: “When you’re anonymous your invinsible, you can say whatever you want.”

This supports the concept that individuals felt empowered online to act in ways that would not be typical of their offline behaviour, and may be construed as disapproved by society. When an individual is anonymous the consequences from authority figures and perhaps judgment of peers is diminished and thus the individual can feel a sense of freedom. Anonymity gives rise to the experimentation of behaviours that individuals may not be open to trying if the repercussions could be directly linked back to the individual.

Blaine: “[When] I’m anonymous I enjoy [it], but I don’t really want everyone to know that I’m really into [what I’m looking at].”

These words reaffirm the notion that privacy as beneficial, leading to a more satisfactory

experience online. Respondents enjoy being able to engage in online information searches that are secret and remain unseen to peers, thereby reducing judgement and potential discrimination from social circles. Another participant also recorded that the preference for remaining anonymous was for privacy reasons, particularly so as not to be judged on their opinions expressed online. This emphasises the fear that this demographic has of the peer perception that can be experienced offline. The online environment however, reduces these factors and can rid individuals of these inhibitions of social judgement. This element in itself is liberating for individuals and furthers the notion of freedom of expression. One particular interviewee mentioned another advantage of privacy in terms of weight loss by comparing online searches to a face-to-face interaction of being approached to discuss getting in shape:

Blaine: "It's not that I don't want to lose 7 kg in 7 weeks, it's because I don't want my friends to think that I want to lose 7 kg in 7 weeks"

The participant cares so much about peer perception. This shows a clear and benign example of privacy use when an individual is anonymous. Although this shows a harmless and non-offensive side of anonymity, it appears that some interactions and communication with individuals may be a lot less empathetic. Some areas online, such as chat groups or forums, can begin with genuine and courteous communications but still vary in behaviour considered normal offline. At other times the behaviour can vary through using anonymity as a shield to express a strong opinion:

Jackson: "I would use anonymous behaviours if I had a very aggressive opinion that I didn't want to be held accountable for"

Whatever the attitude differentiation, the general consensus from these findings suggests that anonymity can give rise to an individual's feeling of internal power through the notions of freedom of expression, and privacy without judgement or consequence.

Internal power signifies the emancipation felt from individuals with a heightened sense of independence. Although this aspect is amplified, external power or power used to influence others appears to be rather non-existent. This is identified through the overarching belief:

Blaine: "...I feel like it's much harder to get power and to exert power over people in an online platform because of the anonymity of people being invisible and choosing what [others] can and can't see"

Isabella: "I would say on ... news articles, there is not really a space for people to feel powerful, and if it's anonymous I also don't think you can really feel that powerful."

This extends the belief that authority and hierarchy do not have any weighting on anonymous behaviour. This is because an individual's identity is associated with such factors as status, expertise and respect, all of which can be associated with one's sense of power in the offline space. When this identity is removed from the individual in the online space, so too will the perception of their power, so that peers have no tangible judgements of character to associate power with the individual.

These findings suggest that the online environment should be separated into two areas in order to develop a deeper understanding of behaviours online. These two fundamental aspects cover the space of anonymity online, and the space where one's identity is clearly portrayed alongside the content that is communicated. The behaviours portrayed when individuals were identified appeared to be clear representations of the individual with only minor differences apparent, involving the desire to selectively represent themselves in a positive light, in order for peer judgements to be positive.

Jacob: "I have to admit I did put a bit of time in picking which photos that I put on there, basically it's just being able to put my better photos together."

This reaffirms the idea of individuals wanting to put their best foot forward in order to appear accepted by peers. Building on this is the concept of emotional attachment. When an individual is representing themselves online they tend to be significantly more invested in what and how they communicate, particularly because of the repercussions that could ensue. It is not surprising that when this identity is then stripped from an individual the idea of reduced inhibitions is apparent, which is emphasised by the lack of emotional attachment and investment in the interaction.

In summary, the findings on anonymity propose that individuals who engage in anonymous communication do at times show differences in behaviours from those used in face-to-face interactions. Although communication can be harmless and non-volatile, it appears that anonymity is used as a shield from both peer judgement and authority. This allows

experimentation in behaviour that can lead to inquisitive episodes and aggressive communications on such topics that would not typically be discussed face to face. Despite this behaviour, it is postulated that empowerment and emancipation increases online while the ability to influence and persuade peers decreases, creating a more equal space for all members.

5.2 *Disembodiment*

The notion that the online environment gives rise to freedom of expression is extended through a freeing of the body as well. This idea is portrayed in the theory of disembodiment, which explores how individuals in some online communities enjoy being able to detach their own identity with what is being said or done. Another important factor that makes disembodiment a fundamental element of expression online is the lack of physicality, creating an opportunity and space for individuals to free themselves from the boundaries of their own physical stature and personality to be able to create a new and desirable identity and persona. In most cases of online gaming this persona has the ability to perform tasks that would not be possible with the individual's real life self.

Joseph: "quite often one of the things I do now that I'm a fire fighter is when I game I always go to the fire station and drive a fire truck because I can't drive fire trucks in the real world but I can on the game"

When an individual has the opportunity to separate their actions and behaviours from themselves, a newfound freedom is significantly developed, which enhances the sense of

creating a new, fulfilling identity.

Sophia: "I've created a character that looks absolutely nothing like me but that's who I am in the game... you don't even use your real names... again that's kind of the whole creating the new identity."

In terms of the above respondent, a new identity was chosen that was perceived to be visually desirable. This reason did not always hold consistently in the study, as there were many varying reasons as to what individuals wanted for their virtual identities. For example, others chose new identities for reasons of amusement:

Allison: "It's part of being online, it's the fact that you can be who you want to be in a way which means having some random name that's stupid or entertaining..."

For whatever the reason, the overarching notion that was reaffirmed by respondents was that creating a new identity was a positive experience. The concept of being able to separate one's physical identity and personality from the virtual world through disembodiment was welcomed. A relatable notion that was also found during the study was the theory of escapism. Many respondents felt as though online interactions were an enjoyable way to escape from reality to a different world completely detached from their real lives. The idea that whatever is said or happens when an individual is anonymous and cannot be related back to that individual, supports further the freeing notion of disembodiment.

Joseph: "It's the ability to escape from reality I guess and do whatever you want"

Logan: "It's just because I'm anonymous they don't know who I am and I can do and say anything I want"

The idea of being free from consequence and not accountable for actions and behaviours extends the concept that the ability to escape reality is firmly embedded within the theory of disembodiment.

As a result of completely separating the self from the virtual world, the concept of reduced authority figures is also reaffirmed. An individual with identity removed has the opportunity to freely choose an alternative persona without being bounded by physical cues or representation of status, meaning the ability to express power becomes limited.

Sebastian: "Online its actually quite difficult to sort of perhaps identify yourself as a leader or position of authority or something like that."

When an individual wants to escape their own reality, they free themselves from the bounds of their existing identity and create a virtual persona to allow behaviours and expressions that cannot be associated with who they really are. This divide between one's online identity and the real world reduces the repercussions and consequences of an individual's behaviours, actions and expressions, which undermines the grounds of authority. Power dynamics become internal because authority control can be dismissed easily. This can be exemplified in a

potential increase in an individual's feelings of such elements as confidence or self-efficacy through a heightened belief that they control outcomes as opposed to authoritarian figures being in control.

Internal power through the notion of escapism is emphasised again in disembodiment theory because it extends the idea of freeing the individual from the confines of their own identity. In a space of anonymity where individuals do not associate the virtual character with the actions of their own identity offline, they justify behaviours based on their character's will as opposed to their own, as a means to feel freedom and thus feel internally powerful. They are free from authority, social norms, consequence, judgement, and are unaccountable for negative behaviour.

5.3 *Impersonalism*

Bill: "Whereas conversations online, they're just so impersonal"

It is suggested that through anonymous communication, interactions become less personal. It follows that when an individual is unknown to another party, it is less likely that the individual would use the same expressions or behaviours than when communicating with someone known to them. Further, if an individual does not know who they are talking to, it would be hard to personalise the interaction, either positively or negatively. From a favorable perspective it would also be hard to compliment an individual on physical appearance or have an accurate representation of their personality to encourage. On the other hand, it would be hard to specifically target and insult a stranger who the abuser knows nothing about, and for

the victim to take the negativity personally. It was found that with impersonal interactions, aggressive content as well as experimental behaviours, was more acceptable.

*James: "... I'm not sure if they're getting hurt you know I'm just talking
bullocks, but in person it can get quite personal and you can see whether
they're going to be upset or angry, things like that."*

Even when an individual is identified, the reduced association between individuals online also represents the impersonal aspect; this lack of personal relationship causes less meaningful connections. Developing bonds with others entails a process of acquiring personal information about an individual; the evolution of knowledge between individuals about one another is what bases a compatible relationship.

*Bill: "I'm more competitive offline because I have more connection with
the people I'm competing against I guess... whereas online it's so vast
and so many people it's just that connection kind of spread"*

This exert represents the idea that having personal connections with individuals makes an experience more significant with longer lasting effects. This is reaffirmed by the idea that both internal and external attributes make an individual unique and significantly aid in an emerging relationship. Therefore personal characteristics of an individual are important in creating a memorable exchange.

Sebastian: "It makes it a lot more personal when you have your identity"

associated with what you're saying."

Again the fundamental element of revealing one's identity shows a significant influence on the ability to develop emotional links with others. The online environment, with the lack of visual or verbal cues, reduces the ability to develop strong bonds because it is harder to get to know someone on a deep level of connection and understanding.

Another important theme reinforcing the idea of interaction online being impersonal is the decreased need for effort to be exerted into communication. With a lack of this, it seems consequences are not valued as heavily or carry as much weighting since the interaction is not considered as significant. This is the opposite effect to offline where social interactions carry a lot more anxious nuances and require more effort in order to socially communicate.

Sophia: "[When you're face-to-face] you're not hiding behind your computer, you've actually taken the time to do yourself up to drive to this place, I guess it's more personal in a way, rather than the impersonal social interaction [online]."

This exemplifies the idea that offline interactions create a space which exposes an individual's vulnerabilities. The more personal the information that is shared by the individual, the more judgement and peer evaluation they may feel as a result. However, in an online environment it is easy to hide behind the metaphorical shield that is the Internet as a means to protect the self from judgement or persecution.

This response suggests that the more personal the disclosure the more opportunity there is to

feel influenced or bound by controls. This is because of the increased vulnerability of an individual when disclosure of personal information takes place. It was found that an individual is also more likely to be influenced by somebody they knew on a personal level and respected as opposed to an unknown stranger. A related notion therefore is that in an online space there is a reduced external power because the online platform has less personal connections, and thus less opportunity to influence or exert power over individuals.

Isabella: “[I’ve never felt powerless online] because it’s never personal online”

Because face-to-face interactions are more personal, leading to more meaningful relationships, this suggests that the opportunity to influence via power is also enhanced in the offline state.

It is important to note that the idea of disembodiment online is also extended through impersonalisation because individuals feel less bound by others and a feeling of independence is nurtured. The impersonal space offers the ability for individuals to develop their own stance and opinions, as opposed to abiding by, or conforming to, peers or authority figures. Impersonalisation therefore assists the increased sense of internal power by a reduction in the ability to exert external power.

5.4 Proximal Distance

As the term proximal distance suggests, this theory portrays the effect of geographical

sparsity within the Internet. With reference to the online environment, proximal distance is one of the most fundamental differences that divide this element from its offline counterpart. The enhanced separation between individuals that the Internet advances creates a chance for behaviours to again be experimented with and attitudes manifested that would typically be seen offline. These are able to be expressed with little fear of consequence from both external factors such as disapproval or punishment as well as internal factors such as shame or guilt.

Allison: "It's much more accepted that you could have whatever opinion because you're kind of distant because of the computer, which leaves you kind of free of persecution..."

This behavioural acceptability is a recurring theme and suggests there is a clear differentiation of social rules between the online and offline settings. While offline there are many learned nuances of what is socially acceptable and even expected behaviour of individuals in a public environment. However, online these rules are not as clear. While an individual is anonymous and clearly separated from others with whom they are interacting, the behaviours that are socially acceptable change dramatically. Topics of discussion that may not be engaged in offline may be easily explored online.

Allison: "online you can just get into topics a lot easier, whereas in real life so many things that would be off limits until later on in the friendship um so whether it could be something like sex or drinking or even religion or politics..."

The notion of acceptability in the online medium as a result of such elements as the geographical distance also translates into negative behaviours, particularly in the online gaming arena. It would appear that physical distance between individuals removes certain empathic responses and enables the opportunity to vent or express belligerence. This could be due to little chance of actually meeting, and thus the accountability for their actions is removed. The idea that they also cannot see the reactions or person they are talking to can decrease their sense of wrong doing. This is demonstrated in the following examples:

Blaine: "I would say that I would be more offensive online towards other[s] than I would be if I wasn't online."

Blaine: "If I'm playing against someone from a foreign country ... I'm more likely to go above and beyond in a negative way, compared to] what I would usually do"

Other emotions, such as anxiety when meeting a date face-to-face and wanting to come across as desirable, are also reduced with proximal distance. As individuals feel geographically separated from an interaction it appears to reduce anxiety. Again this could be because there is less opportunity for public embarrassment or shaming by peers. One interviewee offers an example of lessened anxiety online:

Jonah: "It's a different experience ... the fact that it's so distant, it's hard to ... be nervous."

The final postulated aspect that creates differences in behaviour because of proximal distance experienced online is the idea of asynchronicity. Individuals are not bound by location with the online medium, so are given the opportunity to communicate with anyone, anywhere, at any time. However this interaction is not always immediate, which allows for the structure and censoring of thoughts and opinions. Individuals can take advantage of this by carefully planning the content they post in social networks to create enhanced attributes of themselves, such as intelligence or desirability. The way individuals can portray themselves can vary from their offline personality, even if only subtly, allowing less immediate response time than offline, enabling them to present themselves in a more appealing manner. This structured presentation is exemplified by this respondent referring to arguments engaged in online:

Isabella: "I would probably say [my opinion] better online because I would have more time to think about it... and censor out emotive behaviour online, and make it more just about being a good structured argument."

The theory of proximal distance can be used to explain many differing behaviours as a result of physical separation. This notion further reinforces the opportunity for individuals to experiment with communication behaviours reducing internal and external consequences. These behaviours include discussing taboo subjects with less judgement or disapproval, and reduced anxiety when interacting with a desired individual.

The rules of social acceptability become unclear and differ as a result of proximal distance, again leading to offensive or aggressive behaviours, specifically in online gaming, where

individuals feel a lack of consequence and reduced external power. Asynchronicity is a noteworthy theme with significant relevance to proximal distance, allowing time to present controlled responses, attitudes and opinions to enhance their persona online.

5.5 *Social Identity*

An individual's preoccupation with how their peers judge them is especially prevalent in the sample demographic of this study. The theory that one's behaviours and attitudes are structurally based on such concerns as appearing desirable to others encourages portrayal of favourable behaviours, such as humour or intellect as part of one's nature, through fun or vivacious characteristics. This preoccupation can inhibit the expression of genuine thoughts, opinions and behaviours of young adults. They are developing during significant life stages such as moving to new cities for university, the beginnings of a choosing careers and developing new relationships. Many participants were concerned with how their peers perceived them and the fear of judgement and rejection seemed to be particularly noticeable, as exemplified in this exert:

Bill: "I do worry if people are judging me like if I do this are they going to think I'm wierd and take offense or not want to talk to me again."

With reference to the online environment, it was notable that participants carefully thought out and structured their appearances and behaviours when they were identifiable to peers. These findings suggest that one's social identity is extremely important in the development of, and publication of, ones thoughts and opinions online particularly when their identity is

available to peers and the concept of asynchronicity is apparent. This notion can be explained by the desire for individuals to feel accepted and to be perceived positively by their peers as a means to belong to a specific and preferred social group. An interviewee speaks an example of this:

Blaine: "... there's obviously a part of me that would like to go wild at parties ... so [I would] take a photo having a wild time at a party and put it on facebook and I know that my friends perceive that [as] like he's having a wild time at a party and we all like to do that ... this is cool."

The importance an individual places on belonging to a social group is furthered by the notion of feeling accepted in terms of expressions of thoughts and feelings. Individuals that feel they can share their opinions without persecution feel a sense of freedom and enlightenment. This is important for an individual's development as it helps them to shape behaviours and opinions. If an individual feels constricted by what they can share with friends or are unsure of how their personality will be perceived, anxiety can arise and certain behaviours will be minimized for fear of negative judgements. The fear of rejection can ultimately lead to social embarrassment which is an inhibiting factor for many individual's behaviour, particularly exemplified in these words:

Joseph: "In social settings if you actually approach someone and they say "no, I'm not interested in interacting with you" it has a physical tangible bearing on the way you think... I still remember all the times I've been rejected... [for example] in a bar [if] you get rejected you feel

like everybody has heard it, everybody has watched it [and] you just wanna go home and curl into a ball because you're embarrassed.

This clearly demonstrates the effect that social judgement creates fear of rejection or embarrassment, which significantly influences an individual's future interactions. Rejection and other negative outcomes can be significantly reduced in the online environment since the interpersonal aspect is removed. An individual cannot directly receive others' negative perception of public shaming such as laughing or judging of their behaviours. This in itself offers more freedoms for an individual. In this sense it appears that the online medium creates a space where individuals feel they are freed from this judgement, particularly when they are able to remain anonymous. An interviewee explains the sense of freedom that is associated with discussing thoughts and feelings without the empathetic preoccupations of social interactions that would be expressed face-to-face:

Allison: If you're online you can talk about stuff a lot easier and a lot quicker than if you're in real life because in real life you're all worried about offending people and you don't necessarily feel comfortable with it whereas online ... there's nothing to worry about"

Furthering this concept is a lessened appreciation of other's reactions to an individual's behaviour. Online the ability to understand how an individual will interpret opinions is lost and thus a freedom of expression for those opinions emerges. An interviewee discusses the increased empathy needed during reactions in a face-to-face interaction:

James: “So you got to take into consideration...what people are going to think of you and what it is going to be like next time you see them and what your relationship is with that person”

This is compared to the online environment where there is reduced recognition of the recipient of the interaction. Thoughts and evaluations of how others might feel are significantly reduced because the concern of others does not carry as much weighting as in an offline interaction. This provides support for the impersonalised theme previously discussed. An example of this is seen in the following statement:

Allison: “It is a lot easier being online, you don’t have to care as much about anything um how you come across, how they come across, who you deal with, it’s just relaxed and it’s easy”

Many participants expressed the lack of online sharing that they participated in, if and when their identity was attached. Also a recurring theme of “no-one cares” was noted. This inhibited the publication of one’s thoughts or opinions online. However when anonymity was present, individuals were more likely to express certain thoughts or arguments because the fear of social perceptions was removed. This highlights the overarching and recurring social identity theme that all participants want to belong to a social group. Many respondents saw this in terms of being liked, with one particular interviewee preferring to argue online than with direct friends, for fear of negative repercussions and perceptions.

Isabella: “The gratification and satisfaction that I feel in winning a

debate online, doesn't compare to the gratification ... in winning debates in real life... I don't necessarily even feel gratified, even if I feel like I've won a face-to-face argument... it's still never that satisfying the fact that you argued with them in the first place."

The opportunity that the online setting creates, providing an environment free of judgement, helps individuals express opinions without the preoccupation about peer perception and is a fundamental influencer in offline behaviours. Findings in the current study found that where there is a reduction in social identity online, so too was an individual's feeling of freedom of expression, because of the opportunity to remain anonymous. However in an online setting when the individual was identifiable, planned expressions were well thought through to ensure the individual appeared as desirable as possible, in an attempt to feel a sense of acceptance and therefore belonging.

5.6 Technological Dehumanisation

A fundamental theory of this study is that of technological dehumanisation. This notion refers to the removal of personified actions and behaviours when an individual interacts online, decreasing innate compassion and empathy toward others. The current study suggests that the apparent lack of empathy is not portrayed through apathy alone. That is, individuals act in specific ways of apathy as a result of dehumanising the other individual in the interaction. An example from an interviewee shows that when an individual's identity is subtracted from an engagement, it is difficult to see them as a person and thus they are treated accordingly, as an object as opposed to a human with feelings:

Sebastian: “If it’s like a personal profile or whatever it’s like you’re having an argument with this person as opposed to having an argument with this stranger or whatever you’re having this argument with this thing on the computer”

Here, the computer screen is seen as a metaphorical shield that creates a comfort zone for individuals to say anything and behave in certain ways that they cannot be held accountable for. Because of this shield, individuals do not associate conversations with a person therefore empathetic or considerate feelings that would be expressed offline as a natural reflex are minimized. Most extreme cases are when an individual is anonymous; the less identifying information about a person reduces the concept that they are a person at all, which emphasises the dehumanisation. In this sense individuals show apathy as a byproduct of dehumanisation, as exemplified in the following statement:

James: “[In terms of] bullying in person, most of the time people will see how someone’s taking that and sort of adjust their behaviour whereas online they can go all out and not care.”

This emphasises how individuals behave in certain ways that differ from offline communication because of the lack of connection that they feel for the other person. This goes beyond the sense of an impersonalised interaction by suggesting it is an overarching disconnect from humanity that allows an individual to behave so carelessly towards others that it is not typical of their offline communications. This idea is shown also in the following

interview example, which portrays technological dehumanisation as a total lack of personal connection:

Bill: “yeah I sort of joke with [people], if I feel like it’s a real person, whereas with typing it, you don’t see the person you don’t know who they are. They could be just the computer, yeah that lack of personal connection.”

This theory also extends to a lessened sense of judgement and rejection of the self. When individuals are online the disembodied nature of interaction causes them to dehumanise others making it easier to deal with what might have been a hurtful or negative interaction online. With specific reference to rejection, an interviewee explains the difference in feelings, comparing online and offline environments:

Jonah: “Well ... it’s not as rough at all than being rejected in real life because all they know about you is a wee thing that you typed and what one photo of you looks like so it’s not like they’re saying no to you, they’re saying no to this wee thing, to a page”

The finding that empathetic responses were limited online needs to be emphasised. A lack of use empathy is seen among all participants in varying forms. Some subjects expressed refraining from empathy as acceptable egocentric behaviour, for selfish motivations, or behaviours being targeted toward others without the cognitive process identifying the receiver as a person. An example is given below identifying the acceptance of withholding such

behaviours:

Bill: “Oh yeah like I wouldn’t be that compassionate online, or empathetic I wouldn’t go down those lines ... It’s just all about my experience, just a bit more selfish.”

The pivotal theory grounded in the data of the current study suggests that individuals behave differently when they are communicating anonymously because they do not associate who they are communicating with as being personified. This concept is reaffirmed by the main variant of the study, which appears to be the lack of human empathy through the expression of a caring nature or any form of consideration for others. It is our innate human nature to look out for our own species and it appears the online medium creates a shield which removes this innate and automatic response. This may be because in the context of the online space there is a physical separation through the clear barrier provided by the computer screen. This tangible estrangement allows individuals to remove what is being said from whoever is receiving the message. The human detachment is suggested to be a fundamental aspect developed by this study to suggest a difference in behaviour is the result of technological dehumanisation.

5.7 *Antecedents of Power*

Findings from the current study suggest that influential power is significantly less apparent online than it is in face-to-face interactions. Typically in the offline environment the use of external power over others can be seen in the form of punishment or reward however in an

online environment these strategies are minimized. Punishment cannot be achieved since there is a reduction in the weighting of an authority member's status and influence online, as well as a restriction of the opportunity for peers to judge or disapprove. This is particularly apparent when an individual remains anonymous and therefore cannot be held accountable for their actions. Reward is also restricted in the online environment since there cannot be tangible exchanges allowing power influence. This is coupled with proximal distance separation that individuals have with one another, which can also remove factors of influence. When the use of the physical external environment is removed by the online environment, it appears that so too are the subtleties of influence. For example the following interviewee explains how easy it is to ignore and remove the self from undesirable situations without repercussions.

Logan: "...it's kind of hard to feel powerful on the internet because of the anonymous factor... like I'm not sitting in a room arguing with you so I don't have to put up with you after the arguments finished, so I can just kind of like close the web browser and go somewhere else."

When the physical world is removed from interactions and therefore the ability to influence through authority is severely minimised, the result is more of an equal playing field for all members participating in the online community. This is signified by a respondent who explains this with reference to peer dynamics:

Jacob: "I think those social hierarchies [are] a lot more transparent like they're not as easily distinguishable online so it's a lot more free, it's a

lot more sort of round circle than it is a ladder so everyone is sort of on the same level.”

Although it appears the use of external factors with the intention to influence is minimised, this does not rule out the presence of power altogether. It is suggested that the use of internal factors play a major part in appearances online, due to the factor of internal power being emphasised in this environment. This study proposes that internal power can be divided into two core elements. The first element refers to characteristics of a person that build the perception of an individual's power in the eyes of those who surround them. These characteristics include both expertise and respect. The second element is the power in the eyes of the individuals, shown as self-efficacy and sense of agency. This can be seen through characteristics of confidence or self-assuredness. The below examples show reference to the first element of an individual's power, as perceived by others, because of a heightened sense of expertise and respect:

Sophia: “I guess I would perceive someone as having more power if they were awesome as well as nice because they almost earned your respect and I would put them as – yeah probably having more power”

James: “um yeah just with that whole experience and knowledge thing where they know more or they just seem more authoritative”

The second core element of feeling a heightened sense of internal power through self-confidence online that would not be as easily achieved in a offline interaction is exemplified

in the exert below:

Jackson: "I can sit in my little self confidence bubble [online] and ... I'll tell them like actually what I'm thinking about [rather than being] real passive about it."

Furthering the second element is the concept of safety, which can also be deduced from the above example. Safety is a major factor in the online environment that differs from the offline world. It is suggested that safety refers to the ability to hide behind a computer screen allowing control of ones environment without consequence. The opportunity to control surroundings gives many individuals a sense of security that can help to increase their sense of internal power because they have higher belief in their ability to influence or achieve desired outcomes, such as voicing their personal opinion.

Extending this idea is the sense of expertise, perceived as superiority, in order to increase an individual's personal perceived power. When individuals feel they are better at an online game or more intelligent than another in an online forum, they too can feel a heightened sense of self efficacy and confidence. An example of a subject feeling a sense of superiority through intellect is given below:

Isabella: "because people frustrate when they are really, in my opinion stupid, if they say stupid things I want to just correct [them] so badly because [they are] wrong..."

*[I feel] satisfied, [when I've won a debate], like I have shut them down
and they are not going to go around saying stuff they don't know about"*

This study suggests that power over one's own internal environment is not only apparent online but is emphasised in different ways in the online environment. Examples are found in terms of the perception of an individual's power by others or through one's own perception of themselves. It is proposed that portrayals of external power, with regard to using direct influence over others, is not evident online. This could be explained by the fact that rewards or punishments appear ineffective due to the theories previously discussed. An individual must possess knowledge or skill, or be respected, in order to be perceived online as powerful. Internal power is therefore more prevalent in the online environment, which leads to individuals feeling a heightened sense of freedom and, at times, confidence.

5.8 Behavioural Responses

The outcome of the fundamental themes described is a variety of different behavioural responses. The findings suggest that participants alter their actions significantly when the ability to be anonymous is available. How they change their behaviour is what differs depending on the specific arena of the online interface. For example, individuals who participate in combative or sports gaming tend to express more aggression and offensive behaviours. This could be a response to the competitive nature of the individual and their opponent, teamed with the impersonal environment of the game. An example of amplified hostility online is shown through the words of respondents who frequently engage in shooting

(first example) and competitive sports (second example) games:

Bill: “[I would say] stuff I wouldn’t say normally because you have that shield that anonymous shield... the more you can offend someone the more enjoyable it is, yeah it’s just part of the game.”

Blaine: “online I would be more aggressive toward people.”

In fantasy games it appears the scene is typically different, where offensive behaviours generally do not occur to the same extent. Instead the findings propose that those who enjoy frequently communicating with others commonly experiment with behaviours using the online freedom to discuss many subjects that would be otherwise disapproved of, without repercussions or consequence. A participant speaks of the positive emotion that can be felt as a result:

Allison: “It’s very freeing to be able to talk about whatever you feel like which is nice... It does change a bit [online] um it’s the whole no consequences thing, whatever you do, whatever you say doesn’t have consequences, um yeah it’s just it’s very nice in that regard”

With regard to anonymous forums, the findings of this study suggest that behavioural responses online again differ from face-to-face interactions. However as there are many different forums online with varying topics of discussion and communities, it is inappropriate to generalise behaviour across all groups. Forums that discuss current affairs, and typically

seem to be intellectual debates, show more of the behaviour responses of superiority and opinionated discussion offline. Other forums however, such as computer or gaming communities, show behaviours of compensation. A respondent notes an extreme example of this:

Logan: "I can't do it in the flesh, I can't sit there and say 'god you're a fucking idiot like shut the fuck up' ... [whereas when] I'm anonymous I can actually tell people to shut the fuck up you know and it feels nice."

Although this behaviour is not typical for every participant, and not typical of the population of individuals engaging in online communities, this behaviour is still apparent and shows the theory of compensation is a major factor influencing behaviours if and when individuals are anonymous. The notion of technological dehumanisation is furthered in this example, as individuals may not rationally process the thought of a person as receiver of the message content. The above behaviours of compensation is shown through offensive language being expressed online in an anonymous setting, when individuals understand the inappropriate nature of the content were it used offline, however these behaviours seem self-accepted in an online capacity. Compensation was also found in social interactions, however in both the online interface and the offline environment, it appeared that individuals who engaged in compensatory behaviours tended to be more introverted individuals. This is not to say that all introverted individuals participate in these behaviours, but it does seem to be a noteworthy discovery. Behaving in certain ways because an individual cannot express the equivalent actions in the real world appears to be an important process for young adults to freely express frustrations without the judgement or punishment from others. This concept can be extended

to the idea of venting. This is not unusual in terms of the online environment and can be exemplified in the following statement of a participant:

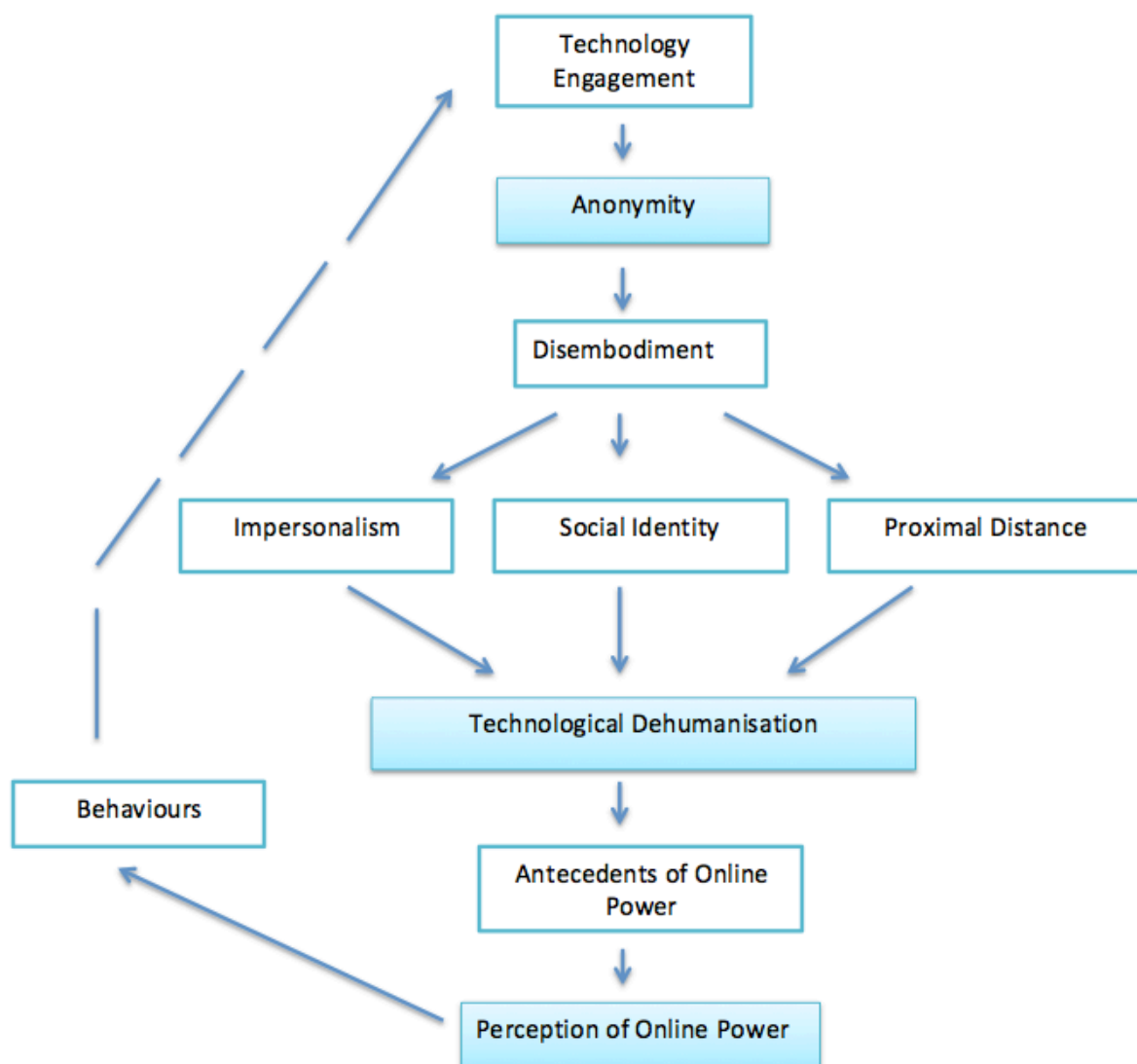
James: “obviously in being anonymous... you vent it, so if you can imagine hitting a boxing bag as hard as you can I guess [to] get the energy out...but its typing”

The idea that feeling a sense of freedom through the ability to vent is unique to the online environment. This notion is suggested to be a pivotal theme in the current research as it explains many of the above behavioural responses. The feeling of being able to detach oneself from one's identity and placing in the physical world, and enter into a virtual environment free of consequence and judgement, seems to create the perfect opportunity for individuals to experiment with uncharacteristic behaviours. These behaviours include a more opinionated attitude, a sense of entitlement as a means to increase internal power through behaviours of intelligence, or the expression of aggressive attitudes that could not be exerted offline. All responses show a clear representation of the behavioural outcomes that are a result of the restriction of an individual's identity, combined with the physical and screen separation between individuals, thereby dehumanising the interaction.

6 Discussion

6.1 Conceptual Framework:

Figure 1: *The Effect of Anonymity and Dehumanisation on the Perception of Power Online*



The findings of this research suggest that when individuals participate in online communications anonymously, they feel disembodied from the communication content posted online. This disembodiment leads to an impersonalised interaction that is disconnected from the individual's social identity because they are free from peer influence or judgement. The disconnect that is experienced is reinforced by the separation created by the computer screen acting as a shield, and the physical proximal distance between the individuals that are communicating. These mediating factors provide anonymity resulting in individuals being personally, socially and physically removed from the interaction. In this way, a subconscious removal of the persona with whom an individual is interacting occurs. This phenomenon is termed technological dehumanisation, where the receiver of content online is not perceived as a human by the messenger, leading to a change in normal power dynamics. This augmentation of power includes the decline in external uses of influences and a heightened appearance of different forms of internal power. Internal power is differentiated into two core categories; internal power perceived by the self, exemplified in terms of self-efficacy, and control of one's own surroundings, and the internal power as perceived by others, exemplified through respect and knowledge. The consequences of the shifting power dynamic due to anonymity and technological dehumanisation are behaviours of aggression, experimentation, and in some cases, compensation.

The core recurring themes outlined by the above framework reaffirm the psychological process of anonymous technology engagement are facilitated by the opportunity to experiment with communication behaviours, such as freely expressing thoughts and feelings (Maczewski's, 2002), a reduced expectation of empathy and a reduced ability for social

judgement (Matheson & Zanna, 1988). The opportunity to experiment with new behaviours occurs because anonymity achieved by the Internet decreases the perception of consequence. This notion can be explained by the theory that an individual feels separated from another, because of both physical distance (Vonderwell, 2003) and the metaphorical shield that a computer screen provides. Christopherson (2007) relates this concept to the theory of autonomy by stating that anonymity and separation from another may lead individuals to feel a heightened sense of freedom. As such, thoughts and feelings that may be criticised face-to-face, can be communicated exclusive of social repercussions online. Werner, Altman and Brown (1992) suggest that this sense of freedom can be very positive for an individual's mental health and wellbeing. McKenna and Bargh (1998) suggest that online communities allow individuals greater self-acceptance through engaging in behaviour that may be condemned or disapproved of by peers and result in harmful social judgements in the offline setting, such as homosexual activities. The opportunity to experiment online with risky behaviours and opinions allows individuals to feel a sense of self-efficacy and internal power because they can freely express what they are thinking or feeling without social or authoritarian restraints. This enhances the feeling of personal internal power.

The inability to influence situations and the social dynamics affecting real-life situations can leave an individual feeling anxious and uncertain about their environment (Bandura, 1982). Bandura (1982) stipulates that when an individual has control over events in their lives they have a reduced sense of anxiety because the events are more predictable. Glass, Reim and Singer (1971) extend this by suggesting that self-efficacy through understanding of the self, as well as coping mechanisms, help to reduce this anxiety. The current research suggests that the online medium creates a separated space for individuals to utilise these coping

mechanisms and more readily control their environment because interactions are impersonal, through disembodiment of the messenger and dehumanisation of the receiver. As such, the social dynamics are reduced in an online setting and the individual perceives a greater sense of certainty about their environment.

The ability to freely express one's thoughts and feelings is an extension of experimenting with behaviours. Christopherson (2007) differentiates these concepts into two distinct categories of catharsis and autonomy. Autonomy is the experimentation of behaviour, and catharsis is the ability for individuals to communicate emotions free of their identity and social evaluation. In the current research, freedom of expression appeared in multiple situations linked to anonymity. Again, when an individual is anonymous they feel guarded from consequence. An extension of the disembodied interaction is that an individual feels removed from what is communicated, and therefore they do not feel responsible for any outcomes. This idea is reaffirmed by Suler (2004) who suggests that individuals who express behaviours of conflict can deflect responsibility for those behaviours when they are anonymous.

When social identity and peer influence is removed from an interaction, individuals feel a heightened sense of freedom to express thoughts and feelings (Mitchelstein, 2011) without fear or judgement or rejection, which is a significant factor in face-to-face interactions. When proximal distance (Rheingold, 1993), both physically and mentally, is apparent the separation allows individuals to feel distanced from any personal identification of the recipient. As a result, individuals in the online environment feel a sense of freedom to say and act in ways that cannot be judged. Suler (2004) supports this notion, explaining that anonymity gives

individuals the opportunity to separate their online behaviours from their offline identity, resulting in heightened self-disclosure and acting-out. However, Suler's (2004) research focused on acting-out as a consequence of reduced self-disclosure and other impersonalised elements (Heim, 1992). At this point it is important to discuss the theory of impersonalisation. In disembodied interactions (Traynor, 2005), when an individual has reduced self-disclosure, the interaction becomes increasingly impersonal. As such, the information that is communicated, even if judged, it is unlikely to leave the individual feeling ashamed or embarrassed because there is not a direct link to the person who delivered the communication. Vonderwell (2003) findings reaffirms this notion where subjects reported to participate more in online discussions because the fear of being negatively perceived was minimised. On the other end of the interaction, the respondent is dehumanised so again negative expressions are not considered personally targeted and, therefore, not considered as hurtful.

The power dynamic is further explained through technological dehumanisation; since there is a reduction in authority online, an equal playing field emerges. This idea is reaffirmed by Collingwood (2012) who suggests that in order for an individual to be prosecuted through the courts they must have an identity, however, when that individual is anonymous, their identity is removed. Further, the notion of reduced empathy and social judgement online, supports the idea of an equal arena for all participants of online communities (Dubrovsky et al., 1991). The repercussion of this phenomenon on power is the reduction in any form of traditionally external uses of power. French and Raven (1959) categorise these as legitimate, coercive and reward. With the online interface lacking in availability of external cues, neither reward nor punishment can be communicated, and with this reduction in authority, each of these power bases become obsolete in the online environment (Sroull & Kiesler, 1992).

This study states that instead of external influencers, the power dynamics that are utilised in an online setting become internal. Self-efficacy and control of surroundings is evidenced because individuals have the potential to create a safer comfort zone and to become shielded by the computer screen and the Internet. The ability to control ones surroundings to increase a person's sense of self-efficacy was noted by Bandura (1982) and extends to the current research regarding the online environment. Internal power perceived by others in the form of respect and knowledge is reaffirmed by French and Raven's (1959) expert and referent power bases. The expert power base is expanded on by Mulder and Wilke (1970) who posit that expert power is achieved when an individual has knowledge or skills that others do not have such that the larger the discrepancy, the more influence can be achieved. The current research suggests that this phenomenon is particularly apparent in online gaming, in terms of skill level to influence other players or through forums where knowledge is portrayed intelligently. Referent power relates to the respect element that French and Raven (1959) describe as the extent that an individual desires to identify with another, for reasons such as likability and respect.

6.2 *Anonymity*

The concept of anonymity is both fundamental and significant to the current research. Individuals who choose to remove their identity from social interactions are exposed to spaces of online interactions, which can be separated and less humanized than if an individual was representing the self. The repercussions of anonymous behaviours online are clearly seen. That is, the instigator feelings of disembodiment (Traynor, 2005), and the receiver being

perceived as dehumanised (Bastian et al., 2011) by the mediating effects of separation, lack of personal disclosure and the inability to be judged by peers. Anonymity in this study was found to heavily influence the perception of power and therefore, the use of varying behaviours that would not be exerted offline or when an individual was identifiable.

Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012) redefine anonymity as an online sense of unidentifiability, extending the idea of namelessness to be broader and more significant to individuals. Tanis and Postmes (2007) suggest that behaviour is affected by identifiability, specifically when an individual is aware that others can link behaviours to their unique identity. The concept of not being identifiable (Jones, 2004) aptly aligns with how the current study views anonymity because it looks into the spanning role explained by three central factors that are more specifically observed in the online environment. These elements include the lack of personal information, the lack of visibility and the inability for eye-contact (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012). These three factors relate closely to the mediating ideas of impersonalised interactions suggested by this study. That is, the lack of information disclosed, the decreased influence of peers from the lack of visibility of an individual to their social group, and the physical separation of individuals leading to the lack of eye-contact between individuals.

Anonymity should not be viewed solely as a means for individuals to act in anti-social or inappropriate ways. Findings suggest that there are advantages for individuals in being anonymous; one of the main and recurring themes in this regard was that of privacy. Werner et al. (1992) argue that privacy can substantially enhance an individual's mental health and well-being. Pederson (1997) reaffirms this belief by proposing that individuals can create boundaries, and thus control the amount of access that peers have to their information. This

process, also termed recovery (Christopherson, 2007), can offer a positive sense of revival. Privacy can also be seen as advantageous by individuals when searching topics or chat rooms and others are unaware of their presence (Suler, 2004), providing a sense of liberation.

The notion of freedom of expression is one of the primary themes throughout the current research. As a result of anonymity, it is suggested that individuals feel the freedom to express unhindered contemplations or attitudes without judgement or consequence because they feel separated from, and not accountable for, any outcomes of the interaction. Karniel (2008) offers a theoretical link between anonymity and freedom of expression through the idea that the very nature of anonymous content is unfiltered and considered to be an important part of online culture, thereby creating an environment where freely expressing thoughts, opinions and feelings is accepted. Collingwood (2012) reaffirms this view by stipulating that anonymity can be considered as one of the fundamental elements of freedom of expression in the context of the Internet. The freedom of expression through the opportunity to provide anonymous comments can also be beneficial in social dynamics for all individuals to feel their opinion is equally significant, such as in the work place.

6.3 *Disembodiment*

Suler (2004) expands on the notion of freedom of expression, suggesting that the process of dissociation is where an individual feels that any information said online will have no repercussions on their offline life. This unaccountability is argued to overshadow morality of an individual because they justify to themselves that actions and behaviours are not their own. Finch (2003) also found that individuals can separate their online world from their offline

world, perceiving the online setting as having moral standards and rules that are detached from their offline realities. Morahan-Martin and Schumacher (2000) suggest that this attitude may be a result of a decreased sense of social responsibility. In this way, individuals do not have to own their behaviours or feel responsible; instead their online actions become a divided aspect of themselves (Suler, 2004).

Kang (2007) builds on this idea by suggesting that disembodiment is seen when there is a decrease in physicality and sensory aspects, with the idea that the body has less influence in cyberspace. Buckley (1997) discusses the idea of disembodiment through a first person account of how disembodiment in an online teaching context improved the way in which her students responded to her. This notion aligns closely to the recurring theme of the creation of a new identity found in the current research, allowing individuals to be freed of bias or physical judgement. Gómez (2010) reaffirms the theory of disembodiment by identifying cyber-communication as a process in which the physical body is considered irrelevant. Boudourides and Drakou (2000) also posit that interaction online can be a process of disconnecting the location of the self from the communication and thus disembodimenting an individual from an interaction.

The final, yet strong theme, revealed in this study's findings was the idea of escapism through the theory of disembodiment. Yee (2006) suggests escapism is sought by individuals to relax and avoid issues in their offline lives. Suler (2004) terms this concept as dissociative imagination, where individuals can escape the realities of their offline worlds by entering into fantasy games or separate lives that can be distinctly removed from normally accepted rules or responsibilities (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000).

6.4 *Impersonalism*

Consistent with Heim's (1992) findings, the results of this study suggest that when individuals create a distinct divide between their online and offline worlds, they feel impersonalised from the individuals with who they are communicating. This impersonal separation may be because there are grounds for those individuals to refrain from personal disclosure, which creates an opportunity to interact on a level free of personal information and preconceptions or judgement about one another (Kang, 2007). Impersonalisation can further result in unstructured interactions, which can occur with anyone irrespective of his or her personality, appearance or status.

Culnan and Markus (1987) suggest that impersonalised interactions are due to the lack of contextual and nonverbal cues in Computer Mediated Communication, referred to as the cues-filtered out perspective. Caplan (2003) reaffirms this idea by suggesting that communication online can be more impersonalised than face-to-face interactions because of the increased awareness of anonymity.

With specific reference to offensive behaviours used online, Kowalski and Limber (2007) suggest that cyber-bullying is impersonal, differentiating this act from bullying offline. Ickes (1993) suggests that empathy is heightened between individuals when they can identify similarities face-to-face and share experiences together. Because these experiences are minimised online, the current research suggests that this empathy is reduced. When an individual remains anonymous and an impersonal interaction ensues (Parks & Floyd, 1996),

the ability to understand another's thoughts and feelings on a level of compassion declines.

A reduced sense of peer judgement in an online interaction is essential in explaining why individuals perceive cyber-communication to be impersonal. The ability to control how much of the self is known to other individuals results in a filtered disclosure and, therefore, a diminished personal interaction. Control of visibility is reaffirmed by Morahan-Martin and Schumacher (2003) who postulate that the Internet allows a space for individuals to regulate their degree of presence and thus intimacy in online social situations. Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012) extend this concept through their findings that individuals that do not want to be identified lessen their degree of visibility through non-disclosure of their personal details along with eliminating the personal element of eye contact.

6.5 *Proximal Distance*

Control of visibility can be employed to create a conceptual link between social presence theory and the current study's concept of proximal distance. Short, Williams and Christie (1976) explain social presence with regard to communication as the varying level of intimacy, which can be affected by such elements of physical distance, eye contact and personal topics of communication. Social presence is affected by the degree a particular medium has to convey body language and other non-verbal cues (Gunawardena, 1995). The present research suggests that because of the separation of the computer screen and the geographical distance between two individuals communicating, the social interaction is particularly depersonalised.

Findings of the current study further the notion of social acceptability. In a face-to-face

interaction there are many understood rules of appropriateness. However, online these rules are disrupted and augmented, providing a space in which individuals feel able to express attitudes or behaviours that would otherwise be frowned upon (Spears et al., 2002). These uninhibited behavioural expressions can be due to the reduced social presence (Gunawardena, 1995), such that individuals perceive that online interactions are not required to follow the same social rules as offline. Because of the social separation and the geographic distance, inhibitions are decreased. Suler (2004) explains the theory of separation by suggesting that individuals who create a divide between online and offline do not feel as vulnerable in cyberspace and can therefore act in ways that may be deemed as socially inappropriate in an offline interaction.

Turkle (2004) indicates separation emerges through their findings that the online environment is viewed as a distinctive space independent of the offline environment. This view of separation reaffirms the present study's findings that suggest that geographical separation of individuals creates an opportunity to both consciously and subconsciously distance themselves, and therefore their behaviours, from the virtual interactions in the online interface. Geographical division appears to influence the decreased social consequence and thus provides the ability for individuals to experiment with behaviours such as freely expressing thoughts and opinions (Mitchelstein, 2011), or even conveying hostile attitudes, particularly within the violent online gaming worlds (Sestir & Bartholow, 2010). Suler (2004) proposes that these behaviours occur due to asynchronicity, because individuals have time to consider their responses, which provides opportunity to escalate expressions contrary to usual social reactions. Munro (2002) discusses behaviours taking place online to be a result of an individual's ability to post content without taking responsibility.

6.6 *Social Identity*

Decreased social consequence is closely associated with the removal of social identity in the present study. Social identity is suggested to be the salient preoccupation for participants of the study. That is, many of the participants were concerned with how they were viewed by their peers. Consistent with the findings of Vonderwell (2003), the findings of this study suggested that when an individual is identifiable and can be held accountable for their actions, they appear to be deeply concerned with how they are viewed to peers and want to portray themselves as desirable. Helm, Möller, Mauroner and Conrad (2012) suggest that this social desirability is because social recognition and acceptance is a fundamental intrinsic human need. However, when identity is removed, so too is this preoccupation. Christopherson (2007) endorses this viewpoint by stating that anonymous individuals have reduced anxiety regarding their appearance or the content they express, and in return are less concerned with how others appear, because any disapproving nuances cannot be identified.

The social compensation hypothesis assumes that predominantly shy individuals turn to online communication (Ebeling-Witte, Frank & Lester, 2007). The reduction in physical and visual cues online creates the opportunity to overcome inhibitions apparent in offline interactions (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). The findings of this study are consistent with Zywica and Danowski (2008), which show introverted individuals are more likely to compensate for their lack of social connection offline by connecting more online. However, the underlying reasons for doing so include the desire to experiment with behaviours that are not deemed appropriate in the offline world. This finding can be translated to any individual,

introverted or otherwise, using the Internet as a means of development and experimentation with behaviours, which is supported through the literature of Christopherson (2007).

With the decline in offline social judgement and consequence, the present study suggests that aggressive behaviours can become widely utilised as a means to vent frustration. Moore, Nakano, Enomoto and Suda (2012) extend this notion of aggressive behaviours by exploring cyberbullies. Their findings suggest that anonymity creates a shield from social consequences and frees the individual from normal societal constraints. Lea, O'Shea, Fung and Spears (1992) explain that aggressive behaviours occur as a result of social influence online. If these types of behaviours are accepted in the online space, then it is likely that an individual will engage in those behaviours more. The expressions of aggressive behaviours extend the notion of the current study that posits that hostile attitudes and interactions are customary in certain spaces such as online gaming. Kayany (1998) reaffirm this perspective by suggesting that social norms in an offline setting influence individuals' communication behaviours in the same way that if it is considered to be a norm in an online group, the likelihood of aggressive behaviours increases.

6.7 *Technological Dehumanisation*

Explanations of aggressive behaviour were found in this study to be the result of individuals dehumanising others during communication. Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012) found that humanising aspects, such as eye contact, contribute significantly to a meaningful interaction. Webbink (1986) shares this belief suggesting that eye contact is strongly associated with achieving social control. However, when humanising elements are removed in online

environments, specifically when individuals are anonymous, aggressive behaviours such as threats were found to be more abundant (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak, 2012). Greitemeyer and McLatchie (2011) agree that online interactions can lead to aggressive behaviours, specifically with online gaming because the violent nature of the games can reduce the perceived humanness of their opponent.

The decreased sense of humanness is consistent with the idea that perceiving an individual as dehumanised facilitates behaviours of aggression through objectification and moral detachment (Bandura, 1999). Čehajić, Brown and González (2009) extend this by suggesting acts of violence or hostility may be due to a reduced empathy resulting from dehumanisation. Haslam (2006) describes empathy as an innate human trait that distinguishes humanity from autonomous machines. The other dimension of humanity that Haslam (2006) discusses is referred to as uniquely human traits, and includes elements such as responsibility and morality. As both the former and latter dimensions of humanity are absent in an anonymous online interaction, this may explain an individual's subconscious efforts to dehumanise their opponent, as found by the present study. Bushman and Anderson (2009) suggest that a reduction in empathy, leading to dehumanisation, can desensitise an individual to the impact of aggressive behaviours on others.

The present research reaffirms the belief that being empathetic and compassionate are typical human characteristics. Therefore, when these critical aspects are removed it is more likely that individuals act in ways where less empathy or compassion is offered to an interaction. Bastian et al. (2011) confirm this belief specifically through online gaming as their findings suggest that violent gaming can negatively impact on an individual's behaviour, reflecting a

loss of humanity through dehumanising other players.

Another important finding associated with dehumanisation is the loss of social connection. The current study proposes that when individuals feel distant and disengaged with those they interact with, they are more likely to subconsciously objectify them as opposed to feeling empathetic or connected with them. Wayts and Epley (2011) discuss this to some degree. Their study suggests that when individuals feel socially connected they are more likely to dehumanise others who are socially distant from themselves. The present study reaffirms the argument of dehumanising peers that are considered distant from themselves. Instead of individuals requiring the need to feel socially connected, they use the separation of the online environment to justify anonymous negative behaviours. Joinson's (1999) findings support the idea that social desirability is reduced when individuals are anonymous. In saying this, findings did suggest that specifically for online gaming, when individuals were playing with friends against unknown others, they were likely to act united in treating the opposition with aggression, reaffirming evidence provided by Bastian et al. (2011).

It has been noted in the present findings that technological dehumanisation facilitates an individual's ability to manage rejection and embarrassment by creating an online shield, protecting the individual from public shaming. Leyens et al. (2003) term this defense mechanism as infra-humanisation and explain how individuals reject higher-order psychological considerations, such as secondary emotions, from dehumanised individuals, including humiliation. Although there are many varying subsets of dehumanisation and how it can appear, the general consensus from research agrees that it is manifested when individuals perceive others as lacking innate human characteristics as a means to dissociate consequence

from behaviour (Moller & Deci, 2009). Gray, Gray and Wegner (2007) suggest this process is that of individuals failing to view others as having conscious awareness and experience.

6.8 *Online Power*

The current study proposes a similar stance to that of Van Dijke and Poppe (2006) who offer two viewpoints to the phenomenon of power, proposing both external and internal aspects, through the concepts of social power and human agency. In terms of the online environment, the present study finds that when individuals are anonymous, external power used to enforce influence over others such as social power is diminished. Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012) suggest that this decrease in external power is due to a reduced disposition to comply when individuals cannot be identified. Suler (2004) complements this concept with the idea that authority is conveyed through physical and visual cues such as attire, body language and the reactions of others. In contrast, in anonymous online communications these cues are absent and thus the presence of authority declines.

Dubrovsky et al. (1991) developed the equalisation hypothesis, which closely aligns with the concept of authority minimisation. This hypothesis suggests that offline individuals are judged differently based on physical characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, physical disability and attractiveness (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986) which can have fundamental impacts on social power (Christopherson, 2007). However, in online settings, when these cues are reduced, communication becomes equalised (Sproull & Kiesler, 1992). Furthering this hypothesis, Postmes and Spears (2002) suggest that those who have lower status offline can be unrestricted by these bounds in online communication. Dubrovsky et al. (1991)

suggests that because of these elements, those with less power offline would have an increased power online. Although the current study reaffirms the former point, in which decreased visual cues in the online environment is related to less authority, it also suggests that the online interface results in equal power dynamics for all participants. As such, instead of feeling more powerful online, individuals appear to be less concerned with external power influences altogether, consistent with the views of Herring (2003). The grounds of the equalisation hypothesis, which have been expanded on in the current study, can impact behaviours in the workplace by encouraging employees to voice opinions or potential concerns anonymously without fear of consequence. This process can have positive ramifications, such as helping colleagues feel equally valued and raising morale.

It is suggested that the online interface allows the aspect of human social hierarchies to be removed so that everyone is considered equal (Danet, 1998). With regard to online communication, the instigator feels disembodied (Ajana, 2004), from what they are communicating to the dehumanised receiver. Because of the impersonal (Moller & Deci, 2009) and distant interaction (Scellato, Mascolo, Musolesi & Latora, 2010), human characteristics and traits are removed from the communication process, which emphasises the lack of humanity. Therefore, authority minimisation creates an equal opportunity forum.

Internal power is considered to play an increased role in an individual's behavioural responses when communicating online. This study found that internal power is separated into two major categories; the internal power perceived by others and internal power perceived by the self. The former category is reaffirmed by French and Raven (1959) who propose two significant power bases of referent and expert power. Martin (1978) suggests that referent

power relates to the oneness an individual feels to another. Building rapport with others to develop this sense of oneness is effective in an individual's influence (Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 1973). French and Raven (1959) enhance this view, proposing that when individuals desire to associate with others for reasons of liking and admiration, they are more likely to be influenced and motivated to uphold the relationship. The influence of well-liked peers was found in the current study also, where individuals perceived others who they associated with or respected as possessing more power than anonymous strangers.

Expert power is more specific to knowledge and expertise of subject areas. When an individual is perceived to have superior knowledge and understanding of a certain topic, it is more likely for the individual to influence others (French & Raven 1959; Mulder & Wilke, 1970; Martin 1978). The present study suggests that expertise relates to power in an emphasised manner online. In a forum, individuals who are able to structure and articulate a strong and intellectual argument are seen as more powerful. Similarly, in online gaming, if an individual is particularly superior at certain aspects they will be held in higher regard than an amateur and will be perceived as more powerful.

Expert and referent power are denoted as internal power sources because they are derived from a person's characteristics and can only be accessed by their own will. These internal characteristics oppose relying on the external environment to overtly influence others behaviours (Lyons & Murphy, 1994). The current study suggests that this internal power is not used online with the intention of influencing others, but rather to satisfy an individual's internal feelings of confidence or gratification.

The second category of internal power is more directly related to confidence through the idea of self-efficacy and human agency as a means to regulate one's environment to feel safe and in control of their surroundings. Peter et al. (2005) reaffirm this belief suggesting that there is more of a sense of security in the online environment when individuals are anonymous. Further to this, Shaw and Gant (2002) found that the use of online communication could boost self-esteem and confidence. The concept is reaffirmed by the current study, which shows that individuals feel safer with an anonymous shield protecting themselves, and the ability to control one's surroundings is increased because social restrictions and judgement are reduced. Bandura (1982) reaffirms that controlling one's environment can help increase an individual's self-efficacy through personal faith that outcomes occur as a direct response to the individual's efforts.

6.9 *Conclusions*

The online environment creates an opportunity for individuals to remove their identity from communications and interact anonymously (Joinson, 1999). By doing so, a process can emerge that disembodies the individual from the interaction, as a means to relinquish responsibilities (Suler, 2004) for behaviours and expressions that can be considered adverse to social norms in a face-to-face context (Christopherson, 2007). This detachment from the self and the portrayed actions can be apparent as a result of the proximal distance between individuals, which is furthered by the separation that the computer screen provides. A repercussion of this disembodied estrangement includes the decline in social judgement and consequence (Matheson & Zanna, 1988), in turn, allowing an individual to respond in ways that do not specifically align with their social identity and peer groups offline. Another

outcome is the impersonal nature of interactions because discussions can be absent of personal disclosure and visual cues (Moller & Deci, 2009).

Through separation, lack of social identity and impersonalised communication, this study suggests a disembodied individual may perceive the recipient as dehumanised and therefore may behave in ways they would not offline. This technological dehumanisation is the pivotal theory of the present research as it answers the first research question as to the main influencers of behaviour in the online environment. By dehumanising an individual, as a result of anonymous technology engagement and the mediating effects discussed above, individuals removed personal linkages in communications. The impersonal nature of communication can be seen as a subconscious response and justification to behave contrary to socially acceptable rules offline, including the use of aggressive or offensive manners.

Since anonymous interaction online is absent of the social and physical nuances of the offline setting, the power that authority figures or higher status peers express offline is diminished. As such, an equal forum for all participants is created, concurrent with the findings of Suler (2004). While the influence of external power bases suggested by French and Raven (1959) decreases, internal power of the individual increases. The present study has identified two subsets of internal power to accurately understand the phenomena; these are internal power perceived by the self and internal power perceived by others. Individuals who perceive themselves as internally powerful have higher self-efficacy (as outlined by Bandura [1977]) in the online environment as they feel they can control their surrounding through the shield provided by the computer screen and thus regulate outcomes more easily. Individuals who are perceived by others to be powerful in the online context have internal characteristics that

make them respected by peers through either likability or superior expertise, cohesive with the referent and expert power bases developed by French and Raven (1959).

In the online environment individuals have the ability to choose whether to be influenced by others as opposed to coercive or forceful methods of manipulation used offline. In response to the second research question, it is apparent that power can be present in the online environment, however, it is primarily internal power that is influential. That is, a perception of one's power is based on their character as opposed to the potential use of coercive forces to influence others. Therefore, the behaviours that occur online are free of authority or peer evaluation. These behaviours, paired with the theory of technological dehumanisation, provides a deeper understanding of why individuals behave in particular ways online.

The conceptual framework developed from this research, showing the effects of anonymity and dehumanisation on the perception of power online advances our knowledge in the rapidly changing area of communications over the Internet. The comprehensive pathway developed provides a richer understanding of the process stages that occur when individuals have the opportunity to remain faceless in cyberspace. Understanding the foundation of technological dehumanisation can help society adapt to the changes and extensive effects presented by anonymity and computer-mediated communication. This can be achieved through an enhanced perspective of social desirability effects and the influences of physical separation. The enriched knowledge of these mediating factors allow humanity to begin to fathom the psychological processes involved in, and evolving with, the development of technology. The fundamental notion that individuals can treat such communication as a detachment from themselves and from others is groundbreaking and cause for further exploration. The

psychological construct of technological dehumanisation suggests that we as a society use measures, such as separation and avoidance of judgement, to justify a means of interaction that subconsciously eliminates human characteristics such as compassion and empathy. These very characteristics that arguably make us superior creatures by means of psychological development, seem to be irrelevant in an environment of minimal authority when one is not held accountable for one's actions. The framework enhances our understanding by means of psychosomatic progressions. This process begins with the detachment of identity and the physical body in order to then dehumanise others, resulting from lessened social and authoritarian consequences, as a means to feel internally powerful.

6.9.1 Limitations and Future Research

The qualitative design of the study came with evident self-report limitations, including the potential for recall errors. Although validity and reliability tend to be stronger, issues of trustworthiness and credibility are limitations of an interpretivist approach because the research relied heavily on subjective experiences. Initially, snowball sampling was used to reach participants, which may have led to sampling bias. That is, the sample may not be representative of the population because there was apparent homogeneity of the sample group. Nevertheless, this did ensure that all participants were central to the subject area being researched, yet evidence of diversity of Internet communications was still evidenced. A large sample size was not achievable within the time restraints given, however, after 21 hours of interviews it was believed that data saturation was achieved and many of the central themes emerged early on and remained consistent throughout the investigation. It is understood that 18-25 year olds, which was the targeted age demographic, have almost certainly different

understandings of the concept and perception of power than do their younger or older demographic counterparts, suggesting their views of social cues and expressions of empathy may be specific to their age. As such, it is possible that the data reported and the theory of technological dehumanisation that was developed may only be representative of young adults.

Further research on the different demographics' perceptions of anonymous behavioural differences would be beneficial. It is also recommended that future research explore a more culturally and geographically diverse sample to develop an understanding of the scope of the findings. As the current research was a grounded study offering a foundation of anonymous behavioural responses, there are many suggestions for further research to be able to build upon the emerged themes. Further analysis on the psychological process of individuals dehumanising others and disembodimenting themselves would be advantageous to gain a deeper understanding into the anonymous psyche. A more practical study that expands the findings into the context of brand appeals would be beneficial to help understand if dehumanising a brand online disconnects the consumer and thus impacts purchasing behaviours. The metaphorical shield the computer screen provides to individuals to feel safe and separated should also be explored further to establish whether there are other relevant repercussions in both a workplace and personal context.

The ramifications that can be identified as a result of freely expressing thoughts and opinions online should be evaluated, including the attitudes of aggression and hostility as well as compensatory measures conveyed by individuals. Questions remain as to whether or not this can be positive for the development of an individual or hinder the process of understanding acceptability rules and ultimately impede an individual's social maturity. This research

provides specific grounds to develop further analyses on how to effectively understand consumer behaviour with regard to influencing online purchasing. Marketing research, measuring the effectiveness of humanised products and internal power expressions for brands, would be advantageous to both the literature and for practical application.

6.9.2 *Implications*

From a theoretical standpoint it is apparent this research provides fundamental grounds for development on a widely emerging subject area. Because the online interface is rapidly progressing and becoming an integral part of society, it is imperative that theoretical works continue to explore the relatively uncharted territory of anonymous behaviours and the resulting perceptions of power online. It is clear that the current research, through means of the pioneering conceptual framework, helps to further the understanding of why particular behaviours are expressed anonymously via the Internet and provides a new dimension to the behavioural discrepancies seen online. The findings of the present research provide a basis for future research, to gain insight into potential repercussions that such behaviours might cause. The framework and discovered theories of the study have established a link between anonymous behaviours and the academic conversation of power dynamics, to help explore the online environment from the perspective of influence and self-control. While being a foundational study, this research also provides alternative and explanatory views that can be used to explain past research of aggressive behaviours and cyberbullying. Understanding why individuals might interact in certain ways online helps deepen our understanding of the phenomena. It is evident that the conceptual framework can advance knowledge in the field of online behavioural dynamics and the association with power. The provided insights create

a fundamental and enhancing understanding that is of benefit to not only the literature, but society also. There is now a clear and distinct psychological process individuals may use in order to justify behaviours adverse to norms, when they are anonymous online.

Managerial implications of this study include insights to more effectively seek an understanding of the maturing demographic and potential workplace behaviours. It is clear through the use of anonymous feedback that managers are able to learn of improvements and suggestions without singling individuals out, and the subsequent risk of being socially evaluated by work colleagues. By introducing anonymous feedback, more transparency in thoughts and opinions would be facilitated and individuals may feel more inclined to provide honest feedback, including the ability to vent frustrations or discuss ways that would increase morale and team cohesion, provided their identity remained anonymous. From the findings of this study, it is noted that the use of anonymity in discussions could lead to a more socially aware group of colleagues who feel equally empowered to voice their thoughts and opinions.

With the present research exploring online behaviours, there are also some fundamental insights that are relevant from a practical standpoint. That is, there now lays a foundation for further work to explore the influence that brands could have in these online interactions. For example, if brands were to emphasise humanistic appeals through their brand strategy and advertising, then consumers may be more likely to feel personally attached to the brand and portray emotions specific to human nature, such as loyalty and empathy toward that brand. For products that may be considered against societal norms, it is recommended that they be marketed more heavily in the online environment where consumers can purchase the product without fear of social or peer judgement.

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Appendix 1:

Interview Questions

- “In face-to-face social interactions, do you feel more or less dominant within yourself and in terms of others, and do you see this as positive or negative? Explain the reasons why.”
- “Outline which specific face-to-face circumstances within the past month where you have felt significantly more or less dominant and how does this make you feel?”
- “Do you feel as though you have ever asserted dominance either within yourself or over others online?”
- “Have you ever felt powerful or powerless online? If so, please share at least one example.”
- “Do you feel you behave at all differently in face-to-face communication as opposed to online interaction in terms of expressing power or dominance? This could be within yourself and/or over others.”
- “Do you feel your personality is mirrored online in comparison to offline? Why or why not?”

Appendix 2:

Participant Information Form



Information Sheet

Department of Management, Marketing and Entrepreneurship

Telephone: 0276363998

Email: Stephanie.coote@pg.canterbury.ac.nz

Date: _____

Power Dichotomies: An exploratory comparison between online and offline spaces.

Information Sheet for: _____

I'm Stephanie Coote, a researcher at the University of Canterbury, and a candidate of the Masters of Commerce program, with a major in Marketing. The purpose of this study is to investigate the behaviour of individuals' social interactions with others, comparing online and offline exchanges. The behaviour focused on in this study is power, and the different ways it can be expressed. Whether that is internally within an individual referring to a higher sense of control within the self, and how this is translated to social interactions, or whether it is a desire to exude power over others. Finally this study aims to find out why these different expressions of power might take place in the different environments.

Your involvement in this study will be an interview lasting approximately sixty minutes. Questions raised will be based on your social interactions in both online and face-to-face environments. Your use of power will be the main focus, exploring how or if you feel you express power within yourself and how that impacts social exchanges, and whether or not you feel you express power over others. This interview will be more of a discussion, with your thoughts and opinions dictating the direction. If at any stage you feel uncomfortable please advise me, and the interview will be stopped. With your permission, this interview will be video recorded. The recording will be kept completely confidential, as only I will know your identity.

Information regarding the accessibility of the University of Canterbury support and counseling services will be made available to you should you feel any mental distress at the conclusion of the interview.

As a follow-up to this investigation, you will be asked if you would like to view the transcript with the results to see how the data is used and to make any comments on it.

You may receive a copy of the project results by contacting the researcher at the conclusion of the project.

Participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. If you withdraw, I will remove information relating to you at any stage of the research.

The results of the project may be published, but you may be assured of the complete confidentiality of data gathered in this investigation, including the video recording and transcript:

your identity will not be made public without your prior consent. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, only the researcher, Stephanie Coote will know your identity. The Supervisor, Ekant Veer will have access to the data only at the anonymised stage. This data will be kept securely in password protected digital files on a UC server and/or a physical cabinet for five years before being destroyed. A thesis is a public document and will be available through the UC Library.

Stephanie Coote is carrying out this project as a requirement for the masters of commerce degree under the supervision of Ekant Veer, who can be contacted at ekant.veer@canterbury.ac.nz. He will be pleased to discuss any concerns you may have about participation in the project.

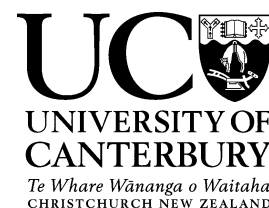
This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, and participants should address any complaints to The Chair, Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch (human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz).

If you agree to participate in the study, you are asked to complete the consent form and return to Stephanie Coote either in person or via email at Stephanie.coote@pg.canterbury.ac.nz

Stephanie Coote

Appendix 3:

Participant Consent Form



Consent Form

Department of Management, Marketing and Entrepreneurship

Telephone: +64 27 6363998 Email: Stephanie.coote@pg.canterbury.ac.nz

Power Dichotomies: An exploratory comparison between Online and Offline spaces

Consent Form for: _____

I have been given a full explanation of this project and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand what is required of me if I agree to take part in the research.

I understand that participation is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time without penalty. Withdrawal of participation will also include the withdrawal of any information I have provided should this remain practically achievable.

I understand that any information or opinions I provide through a video recording will be kept confidential to the researcher and supervisor, and that any published or reported results will not identify the participants. I understand that a thesis is a public document and will be available through the UC Library.

I understand that all data collected for the study will be kept in locked and secure facilities and/or in password protected electronic form on the UC server and will be destroyed after five years.

I understand the risks associated with taking part and how they will be managed.

I understand I will be video recorded unless I advise otherwise.

I understand that I am able to receive a report on the findings of the study by contacting the researcher at the conclusion of the project.

I understand that I can contact the researcher, Stephanie Coote (Stephanie.coote@pg.canterbury.ac.nz) or supervisor Ekant Veer (ekant.veer@canterbury.ac.nz) for further information. If I have any complaints, I can contact the Chair of the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch (human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz)

By signing below, I agree to participate in this research project.

Name _____ Date _____ Signature _____

Stephanie Coote